

Gender & Caste

Blank Page

ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FEMINISM

Gender & Caste

Edited by
ANUPAMA RAO

Series Editor
RAJESWARI SUNDER RAJAN



Zed Books Ltd
London & New York

Published outside of South Asia by
Zed Books Ltd, 7 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JF, UK and
Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York 10010 USA, in 2005

Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan,
a division of St. Martin's Press, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York 10010

Gender & Caste was first published in India
in 2003 by
Kali for Women
&
Women Unlimited
(an associate of Kali for Women)
K-36, Hauz Khas Enclave
Ground Floor
New Delhi 110 016

US CIP data is available from the Library of Congress
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

© 2003 this collection, Kali for Women & Women Unlimited
© 2003 individual essays with the authors

All rights reserved

ISBN: 1 84277 600 2 hb

Cover Design: Visual Vibe

Typeset at Tulika Print Communication Services, New Delhi
and printed at Pauls Press, Okhla Phase II, New Delhi

Series Note

Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism is a series that is premised on the need for an overview of the substantial writing available on a variety of issues in Indian feminism. Each individual volume will relate to an issue of some moment, specifically one on which there has been a wide variety of views and positions. The mapping of these complex and often contentious issues—around ‘feminism’ itself, caste, dowry and inheritance, censorship and media representation, to name the topics of the first few volumes—is intended to serve as a point of entry and guide to what might be unfamiliar territory to some; to those closer home, themselves perhaps participants in these debates, they would indicate some of the shifts in the direction various feminist debates have undergone.

With these volumes we hope to construct a long overdue archive of writings relating to gender issues in India. The materials have been selected from a large mass of several decades of feminist writing scattered in journals and books, pamphlets, manifestoes, speeches and official documents. By bringing them within the covers of a single volume, we hope to provide handy reference to otherwise hard to access resources. The series is therefore particularly intended to serve the needs of research scholars, teachers in Women’s Studies courses, and activists. These collections will at the same time, we hope, bring to prominence a substantial, complex and important body of feminist writing that is closely related to the issues tackled by the women’s movement in India. Viewed in this way, it becomes evident that these engagements,

at once topical and far-sighted, make a major contribution to global feminist theory.

The editors of the individual volumes are experts in their areas. Their introductory essays will provide an overview of the debate/discourse on each topic, identify its landmarks, and offer a distinctive perspective on the theoretical tendencies that determine its frames of reference. The selections are based on implicit criteria, such as the influence a work may have exerted on subsequent thought or policy, its representation of a prominent trend, the contribution it makes to a particular debate, or its intrinsic 'merit'. Every volume includes a select bibliography at the end.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan
Series Editor

Contents

Series Note	
RAJESWARI SUNDER RAJAN	V
Introduction	
ANUPAMA RAO	I
1 Dalit Women, Difference, and Dalit Women's Movements	
We Made History, Too: Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement	
MEENAKSHI MOON AND URMILA PAWAR	48
Dalit Movement and Women's Movements	
GABRIELE DIETRICH	57
Dalit Women Talk Differently	
GOPAL GURU	80
Why I am not a Hindu	
KANCHALA ILAIAH	86
A Dalit Feminist Standpoint	
SHARMILA REGE	90
Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression	
BELA MALIK	102
Dalit Women's Cry for Liberation:	
"My rights are rising like the sun, will you deny this sunrise?"	
PRANJALI BANDHU	108

2 Voice, Literature

- Pan On Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Stories
SUMITRA BHAVE 114
- On a Dalit Woman's Testimonio
M.S.S. PANDIAN 129
- The Subaltern Speaks
MAJID H. SIDDIQI 136

3 History & Anthropology

- The Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement
c. 1925–1948
S. ANANDHI 141
- Reconceptualising Gender: Phule, Brahmanism
and Brahmanical Patriarchy
UMA CHAKRAVARTI 164
- Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship
V. GEETHA 180
- Dr Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women
ELEANOR ZELLIOT 204
- Dalit Women in Western Ethnography
MARY E. JOHN 218
- Caste and Women
LEELA DUBE 223

4 Violence & Sexuality

- Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics
of Power and Violence
VASANTH KANNABIRAN & KALPANA KANNABIRAN 249
- The Impossible Subject:
Caste and the Gendered Body
SUSIE THARU 261

Understanding <i>Sirasgaon</i> : Notes Towards Conceptualising the Role of Law, Caste and Gender in a Case of "Atrocity"	ANUPAMA RAO	276
5 Land & Labour		
The Downtrodden among the Downtrodden: An Interview with a Dalit Agricultural Labourer	GAIL OMVEDT	310
Of Land and Dalit Women	KANCHIA ILAIAH	325
Unmusical Chairs	P. SAINATH	336
Head-loads and Heartbreak	P. SAINATH	341
The Hindu Code Bill for the Liberation of Women	PRATIMA PARDESHI	346
<i>Appendix</i>		363
<i>Bibliography</i>		368
<i>Contributors</i>		374

Blank Page

Introduction

Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism¹

ANUPAMA RAO

In 1995 Gopal Guru, professor of political science at Pune University, wrote a piece in the *Economic and Political Weekly* "Dalit Women Talk Differently,"* drawing attention to the formation of a pan-Indian group known as the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW).² The NFDW was explicitly framed around what Guru described as a "politics of difference" from mainstream Indian feminism. In his piece, Guru argued that this "difference" was essential for understanding the specificity of dalit women's subjugation, characterized by their experience of two distinct patriarchal structures/situations: a brahminical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatized dalit women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of "their" women. In that same year, an edited anthology *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives* was published as the proceedings of a two-day seminar held in 1993 at Pune University. P.G. Jogdand, the editor of that volume, noted the paucity of scholarship on dalit women. One of the contributors to that volume, Vidyut Bhagwat, noted that "By using the term 'dalit women' we are creating an imagined category. This imagining is necessary because we hope that dalit women in the near future will give new critical dimensions to Indian feminist movement as well as to Dalit Movement."³ Bhagwat's receptivity to a specifically dalit feminist position signalled an awareness among feminists of emerging critiques by dalit and lower-caste women, who had begun to take Indian feminists to task for the seeming invisibility of caste inequality to mainstream Indian

feminism. They argued that this had led to an exclusive and partial constitution of Indian feminist politics.

The political empowerment of dalit and other lower-caste women has posed a strong challenge to Indian feminism.⁴ Organizations such as the NFDW have pressed for the inclusion of dalit women's concerns as properly feminist ones. In his essay, Guru applauds the formation of the NFDW as an implicit critique of brahminical feminism, a questioning of Indian feminism's hegemonic impulse to speak for, or in the name of, "Indian" women. Guru argues also that dalit womens' autonomous organizations challenge, at the same time, the reproduction of patriarchal norms within dalit communities.⁵ In brief, dalitbahujan⁶ feminists critique both anti-caste and feminist movements for their particular forms of exclusion. In this introduction I try to map the challenges that groups such as the NFDW have posed to mainstream Indian feminism, and inquire into the implications of such critique in remaking feminist practice.

Struggles for equality, rights, and recognition by anti-caste activists have complemented similar struggles by feminists, yet they have not led to the formation of alliances between feminists and anti-caste activists until quite recently. From the compartmentalization of struggles against caste hegemony as separate from the project of social reform during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the persistence of a political sociological analyses of caste relations as unchanging "traditional" practices, scholars and activists have tended to examine struggles against caste inequality and the critique of gender relations in isolation from each other. The new political agenda being articulated by dalitbahujan feminists demands the exploration of their shared and entangled histories.

Dalitbahujan feminists have gone further than merely arguing that Indian feminism is incomplete and exclusive. Rather, they are suggesting that we rethink the genealogy of Indian feminism in order to engage meaningfully with dalit women's "difference" from the ideal subjects of feminist politics. The question of how *representative* Indian feminism has been evokes both senses of the term representation: as a set of political claims from within the discourse of parliamentary democracy, as well as the impossible

demand for the “authentic” reproduction of presence. Exposing the limits of feminism’s capacity to represent women as somehow unmarked or disembodied from their caste or religious identity stands to throw feminism (and its conceptions of gender identity) into crisis. This introduction explores the perils and potential of this moment, when the categories of women, gender, and feminism must be rethought.

Most of the essays selected for this reader emerged in the context of a renewed national debate about the politics of caste inaugurated by the Mandal decision in 1989. That decision by the V.P. Singh government to provide reservations for Other Backward Classes—part of an expanding bureaucratic classification of communities identified as suffering the cultural and socio-political effects of caste “backwardness”—produced a profound transformation of the political debates about caste and identity.⁷ It renewed demands for social justice by dalits and lower-castes that has consequently changed their political relationship to upper-caste elites, and marks a point of departure for understanding the rise of parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party in the Hindi belt whose recent emergence must be examined against the presence of parties such as the DMK, the AIADMK, and the Republican Party of India that emerged out of the vigorous anti-caste movements of the early twentieth-century in southern and western India.

Situated in that broader socio-political context, the emergence of autonomous dalit and lower-caste womens’ organizations asks how we can reconstitute feminism’s futures in order to more faithfully represent the divergent stakes of womens’ relationship to feminism. Dalitbahujan feminism poses anew the question of how we might understand caste’s complex history as a form of identification and as a structure of disenfranchisement and exploitation; how we can revisit the forgotten and repressed histories that illuminate the criticism of feminism by its most vulnerable and exploited constituency. The demand for historicizing the structures of forgetting and exposing the hidden histories of hurt and humiliation animates the contemporary claims for including caste as a significant category of social life, as an intimate and embodied form of sociality.

In her essay included here, Sharmila Rege “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint”^{*} agrees with Guru’s analysis of the potential contributions of dalit feminism to rethinking feminist practice. At the same time, she goes beyond Guru’s focus on authenticity and dalit women’s voice, and suggests—in the spirit of critiques by women of colour in the United States about the relationship between race and gender—that dalit feminism carries the potential, more generally, to transform upper-caste feminists’ understanding of gender and feminism.⁸ There have been equally strong critiques of this position: Chaya Datar, writing from her position as a well-known feminist from Maharashtra, has argued that the focus on “difference” and identity ignores the centrality of economic exploitation and market fundamentalism in disenfranchising women. Datar has also suggested that revisiting the history of the Indian feminist movement would illustrate the various moments when critiques of patriarchy had folded within them struggles against caste dominance as well (e.g., the Mathura rape case, or feminist alliances with the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra).⁹ Broadly speaking, Datar’s critique might be characterized as a plea for rooting dalit women’s oppression in the domain of the economy rather than in identity politics, and as a demand for maintaining the analysis and criticism of patriarchal relations as the most significant task of dalit feminism rather than, perhaps, the focus on caste oppression and caste mobility.¹⁰

Datar’s reservations about the specifically *feminist* practices of dalit women is based on the argument that struggles against caste inequality might in fact divert attention away from the empowerment of women and the critique of gender relations, while extending the privileges of dalitbahunjan men. Feminists might also contest the notion that the feminist movement has ignored issues of caste. Feminist scholars have certainly engaged with caste issues through studies of women and labour, sociological studies of women from diverse caste communities, studies of kinship, and research on poverty, to name just a few sites. But the recent debates about caste and feminism makes a rather different argument, and one that cannot be collapsed into an assertion that feminism has responded to the gendered manifestations of caste inequality through its orientation towards social transformation.

I suggest in my introduction to this reader that dalit feminism would involve the re-examination of *gender relations as fundamental to the broader ideologies of caste*; that we must understand the multiple and changing manifestations of caste in Indian society if we are to understand the particular forms in which gender inequality and sexed subordination are produced. By drawing attention to the relationship between caste ideology, gender relations in the intimate and public sphere, and broader struggles for democracy and social justice, dalitbahujan feminists are demanding a changed politics of feminism. The demands by dalit and other lower-caste women are not merely for inclusion, but for an analysis of gender relations as they are inflected by the multiple and overlapping patriarchies of caste communities that produce forms of vulnerability that require analysis.

The challenge to disarticulate a unified and monolithic account of patriarchy-in-action also suggests the need to revisit issues of labour and surplus from the perspective of caste and its sexual economies (e.g., see in this reader essays by Ilaiah, Rao, and Tharu), and provides an opportunity to rethink the relationship between ideologies of gender and their material consequences such as the reproduction of gender inequality. Recent dalitbahujan mobilization around issues of identity, representation, and recognition have focused most of their attention on the necessity of re-examining discourses of democracy, yet there is a clear need to integrate this with studies of caste-enforced dispossession whether it be the perpetuation of poverty, or the lack of access to various forms of social capital.¹¹ The symbolic economies of gender and sexuality and the material reality of the economic dispossession of dalit women therefore need to be viewed together. As a step towards such an account, I suggest in this introduction that caste be understood as a form of *embodiment*, i.e., as the means through which the body as a form of “bare life”¹² or a mere biological surface is rendered expressive and meaningful. Caste ideologies draw on biological metaphors of stigma and defilement to enable differentiated conceptions of personhood, and to render the body a culturally legible surface. Taboos regarding touch—ritual sanctioning of practices such as spatial segregation and taboos about physical contact—operate along the axes of purity and pollution

that manage bodies and physical space. Ironically however, such prescriptions are routinely violated by the forms of intimacy that such hierarchies enable. *This is because caste distinctions legitimate forms of socio-political control through the regulation of kinship.* Caste is a religio-ritual form of personhood, a social organization of the world through the phenomenology of touch, an extension of the concept of stigma from the facticity of biological bodies to metaphorical collectivities such as the body politic, and most importantly, it is an apparatus that regulates sexuality. Such ideologies are embedded in material forms of dispossession that are also always forms of symbolic dispossession, and they are mediated by the regulation of sexuality and gender identity through the rules of kinship and caste purity.

Let me clarify the focus of my introduction and the organization of this reader at the outset. I have selected important texts, published for the most part in the last decade, that elaborate and advance our understanding of the relationship between caste and gender in either implicit or explicit ways—due to serious constraints of space, no claims are made here for any comprehensiveness.¹³ Rather, my introduction is an attempt to illustrate how the categories of “caste” and “gender” have been understood by scholars embedded in diverse disciplinary configurations, and to suggest methods of reading such work as a genealogy for considering feminism’s political futures. I am interested in the relationship between the scholarly production of knowledge about lower-caste women emerging in fields such as disciplinary history, literature, and sociology as they relate to political activism and feminist practice, as well as the ways in which political questions of equality and representation might inflect the production of academic knowledge about caste relations. This dialectical relation suggests that the way we understand the political present is framed as much by the categories of analysis we use as they are by socio-political events and processes. In exploring the relationship between sexed subjectivity and caste, I track back and forth between the broader political contexts that have brought visibility to “new” discourses about caste and gender in the past decade and a half, and how such a politics of the present might allow us to reconsider the historical formation of the caste-marked female subject.

I situate the essays included in this reader under three broad themes: 1) An examination of the national and transnational sites where dalitbahujan feminists have challenged reigning paradigms for understanding their experiences, and how they are posing the specificity of dalitbahujan feminism. 2) An analysis of important writing by historians of gender who argue that the project of social reform during the emergence of colonial modernity had to negotiate overlapping structures of caste patriarchy and gender regulation. 3) An exploration of recently published dalit women's autobiographies and testimonies in which issues of agency, self-formation, and experience are explored, and the questions they pose for the ethics of ethnographic representation. All three themes share a basic premise: caste regulation (especially the ideology of untouchability) provides the legitimating structure for understanding the forms of physical and symbolic violence that dalitbahujan women endure. Needless to say, my familiarity with issues of caste and gender in Maharashtra will be evident in the historical and contemporary accounts I provide below, and should be complemented by the growing evidence of exemplary political work by dalit feminists in other regions.

The current conjuncture

The 1980s saw an unprecedented assault on key institutions and ideologies of the modernizing Nehruvian state: constitutional secularism; the civil rights model of "compensatory discrimination" drawing on a rhetorical commitment to equality; a discourse of industrial development and alleviation of poverty, and gendered discourses of population control and female empowerment that targetted women through the regulation of their bodies.¹⁴ In the main, the transformations in political culture over the past two decades have involved a shift in the relationship between the Indian state and its minorities. While discourses of secularism have focused on the status of religious communities (read Muslim) and their relationship to the state, the constitutional commitment to the abolition of untouchability and to the removal of the civic and political disabilities of caste has been enabled by reservations policies. The maintenance of religious tolerance from without, and the reform of caste Hindus from within were complementary

projects embarked upon by the postcolonial state. Events such as the Shah Bano case, the Mandir–Masjid controversy over the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and the debates over the Uniform Civil Code are recent challenges to constitutionally-defined secularism that have exposed the unavailability of older models of tolerance and respect for mobilizing consent regarding the political and cultural rights of minorities. The rhetoric of tolerance appears as an increasingly outmoded way of maintaining civic relation between majority and minority communities as the question of what Hinduism is has re-emerged as a burning question.

While this has clear implications for religious minorities (Muslims, and now increasingly, Christians) who have experienced organized violence by the Hindu majority, the Mandal–Masjid years have also seen renewed attempts by the Hindu right to woo OBCs, and dalits and adivasis as well, as part of a reconstituted Hindu public. The latter constitutes a molecular transformation, indexed most notably by ambivalent attempts to break away from such inclusion by parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party. The consolidation of a Hindu community during the recent rise of Hindu nationalism in India has also, ironically, seen the growth of aggressive demands for equality and social justice by the historically downtrodden castes. Caste assertion both within the domain of parliamentary politics and struggles for recognition without, has accompanied a broader shift towards the Hindutva brand of authoritarian populism drawing on the availability of the “uncommitted voter” as a political commodity, as Arvind Rajagopal (2001) has argued. Such assertions about historic discrimination and its redress mobilize a range of arguments and suggest a set of alleviatory measures that can be mapped broadly as: a) the demand for recognizing caste as a critical component of studies of political modernity, and reservations as a mechanism of social justice rather than a further stigmatization of lower-caste beneficiaries, as occurred during the Mandal debates, b) the more recent demand for reservation for women and for dalitbahujan women amongst the broader set of reservations, and c) a turn towards transnational discourses of human rights that equate caste discrimination with racism. These tendencies veer between the attempt to draw upon existing forms of political participation while expanding the

presence of previously marginalized or unrecognized political subjects, on the one hand, and creating new categories of hurt and injury that must be redressed through novel means, on the other.

Studies of caste have begun to engage with issues of rights, resources, and recognition/representation, illustrating the extent to which caste must be recognized as central to the narrative of India's political modernity. For example, scholars are becoming increasingly aware of the extent to which radical thinkers such as Ambedkar, Periyar, and Phule demanded the recognition of histories of exploitation, ritual stigmatization, and political disenfranchisement as constituting the lives of the lower-castes, even as such histories also formed the burdened past from which escape was sought.¹⁵ Scholars have pointed to Mandal as *the* formative moment in the "new" national politics of caste,¹⁶ especially for having radicalized dalitbahujans in the politically significant states of the Hindi belt. Therefore Mandal might be a convenient, though overdetermined vantage-point from which to analyse the state's contradictory and ineffectual investment in the rhetoric of lower-caste entitlement, throwing open to inspection the political practices and ideologies that animate parliamentary democracy in India as a historical formation.¹⁷

Tharu and Niranjana (1996) have noted the visibility of caste and gender issues in the post-Mandal context and describe it as a contradictory formation. For instance, there were struggles by upper-caste women to protest reservations by understanding them as concessions, and the large-scale participation of college-going women in the anti-Mandal agitation in order to claim equal treatment rather than reservations in struggles for gender parity. On the other hand, lower-caste male assertion often targeted upper-caste women, creating an unresolved dilemma for upper-caste feminists who had been pro-Mandal. The relationship between caste and gender never seemed more awkward.

The demand for reservations for women (and for further reservations for dalit women and women from the Backward Class and Other Backward Communities) can also be seen as an outgrowth of a renewed attempt to address caste and gender issues from within the terrain of politics. It might also indicate the insufficiency of

focusing solely on gender in mobilizing a statistical “solution” to the political problem of visibility and representation. Emerging out of the 33 per cent reservations for women in local panchayats, and clearly at odds with the Mandal protests that equated reservations with notions of inferiority, the recent demands for reservations is a marked shift away from the historical mistrust of reservations for women. As Mary John has argued, women’s vulnerability must be viewed in the context of the political displacements that mark the emergence of minorities before the state.¹⁸ The question of political representation and the formulation of gendered vulnerability are connected issues. As I have argued in my essay included in this volume, such vulnerability is the mark of the gendered subject’s singularity. It is that form of injured existence that brings her within the frame of political legibility as different—yet eligible—for universal forms of redress. As such, it is critical to political discourses of rights and recognition.¹⁹

Political demands for reservations for women—and for lower-caste women—complement scholarly attempts to understand the deep cleavages between women of different castes that contemporary events such as Mandal or the Hindutva movement have exposed. In exploring the challenges posed by Mandal to reigning conceptions of secular selfhood, Vivek Dhareshwar pointed to confluences between reading for and recovering the presence of caste as a silenced public discourse in contemporary India, and similar practices by feminists who had explored the unacknowledged burden of gendered identity.²⁰ Dhareshwar suggested that theorists of caste and theorists of gender might think of elective affinities in their methods of analysis, and strategically embrace their stigmatized identities (caste, gender) in order to draw public attention to them as political identities. Dhareshwar argued that this would show the extent to which secularism had been maintained as another form of upper-caste privilege, the luxury of forgetting about caste, as opposed to the demands for social justice by dalitbahujans who were demanding a public acknowledgement of such privilege.

While this suggests a provocative discursive strategy, there are also groups such as the All India Democratic Women’s Association

(AIDWA) who argue that dalit women's subjugation is materially embedded, that dalit women are thrice-subjugated as women, as dalit women, and as dalit women who perform stigmatized labour. Bela Malik argues in* "Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression," that "It remains a matter of reflection that those who have been actively involved with organizing women encounter difficulties that are nowhere addressed in a theoretical literature whose foundational principles are derived from a smattering of normative theories of rights, liberal political theory, an ill-informed left politics and more recently, occasionally, even a well-intentioned doctrine of 'entitlements.' " (p. 323) Malik in effect asks how we are to understand dalit women's vulnerability. Caste relations are embedded in dalit women's profoundly unequal access to resources of basic survival such as water and sanitation facilities, as well as to educational institutions, public places, and sites of religious worship. On the other hand, the material impoverishment of dalits and their political disenfranchisement perpetuate the symbolic structures of untouchability, which legitimates upper-caste sexual access to dalit women.

Caste relations are also changing, and new forms of violence in independent India that target symbols of dalit liberation such as the desecration of the statues of dalit leaders, attempt to prevent dalits' socio-political advancement by expropriating land, or deprive dalits of their political rights are aimed at dalits' perceived social mobility. These newer forms of violence are often complemented by the sexual harassment and molestation of dalit women, pointing to the caste and gendered forms of vulnerability that dalit women experience. As Gabriele Dietrich notes in her essay "Dalit Movements and Women's Movements,"* dalit women have been targets of upper-caste violence. At the same time, dalit women have also functioned as the "property" of dalit men. Lower-caste men are also engaged in a complex set of fantasies of retribution that involve the sexual violation of upper-caste women in retaliation for their emasculation by caste society. The problematic agency of dalit women as sexual property in both instances overdetermines dalit women's identity in terms solely of their sexual availability.

Complementary to, yet distinct from, such political

mobilization are demands by dalit activists that the Indian government recognize caste atrocities and the sustained conditions of everyday violence as an abuse of human rights. This has revealed an important transnational aspect to dalit demands for rights and restitution. The language of extraordinary violation is the register in which such demands are made. The Human Rights Watch Report *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's Untouchables* (1999) connects these spectacular instances of violence with the structural, ordinary forms of violence and violation that shape dalit subjectivity.²¹ The report is a strong indictment of the Indian state, especially the police, and positions dalit human rights as a matter of global concern: a variant of forms of state-sponsored and socially sanctioned oppression of vulnerable peoples across the world.²²

The stakes of defining dalit identity in terms of human rights were also displayed when human rights activists demanded that the Government of India acknowledge caste discrimination as a form of racism at the recently-held U.N. World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance [hereafter, WCAR] in Durban, South Africa from August 31–September 7, 2001.²³ This conflict indicates that the discourse of human rights has become a critical vehicle for drawing international and public attention to state practice. The internationalization of the problem of untouchability has been enabled by critical forms of mass-mediated publicity and a globally-available discourse of historic hurt and suffering.

While the Government of India argued that focusing on caste discrimination “diluted” the aims of the conference, dalit representatives, such as those belonging to the NFDW, insisted that caste discrimination approximates the practices of racism. Indicting the Indian state and its reliance on the ideology of Hindutva as enabling a specific set of discriminatory practices against caste and religious minorities, the NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism* asserts

We declare that Dalit women are victims of caste and gender violence, used by landlord, middlemen and contractors on construction sites and policemen to ‘inflict political lesson’ and crush protests, struggle and dissent against centuries’ old discrimination being

inflicted on their whole community. Dalit women are raped and mutilated before being massacred and used as hostages to 'punish absconding relatives.' At a very young age they are forced into prostitution under the *devadasi* (maidservant of god) system.²⁴

This declaration is a form of publicity that makes dalit women *visible* as a community of suffering in the very resistance to the continuation of such practices. In the form of a declaration, this statement might be said to inaugurate precisely that imagined subject, "dalit women," mentioned earlier.²⁵ As an evidentiary document it testifies to the structural conditions that shape dalit women's subjectivities, materializing their dispossession through recourse to statistics that quantify dalit women's disenfranchisement in comparison to other women. It is also important to note the significance of testimony as a form of witnessing and evidence-making in recent attempts to raise awareness about the perpetuation of untouchability and its pernicious effects.

In "Dalit Women's Cry for Liberation"*, Pranjali Bandhu mentions the *Public Hearing on Atrocities Against Dalits with Specific reference to Dalit Women* organized in March, 1994 by Women's Voice and the Asian Women's Human Rights Council. She indicates this public hearing as well as attempts to address gender inequality in the context of the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women (i.e., the "Beijing conference") as an important backdrop to the formation of the NFDW. The *National Public Hearing on Atrocities Against Dalits in India* held in Madurai, Tamil Nadu in 1999 also sought to bypass legal bureaucracy and bring dalit concerns directly before a larger public, mobilizing testimonial forms of witnessing. The National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights was also established with aim of using critical publicity that might be more effective than judicial mechanisms in making dalit hurt and suffering visible.²⁶

In a similar attempt to make connections between seemingly disparate sets of historical experiences, André Béteille (1992) examined studies of caste and race as both reproducing forms of inequality, and did so by focusing on the most striking similarity between racial and caste discrimination, i.e., their reliance on gendered forms of control. "There is, firstly, the sexual use and abuse of women, which is an aspect of the inequality of power

seen in its most extreme form in the treatment of women of the lowest rank by men of the highest; this is the aspect of the problem that has received the most attention. There is, in addition, the unremitting concern with the purity of women at the top, associated with ideas regarding bodily substance. . .” Bêteille’s comparative perspective focused on the prevalence of illicit sexual unions between men with caste or racial privilege and women who were materially dispossessed, hence sexually available to them, throwing into relief the relations of sexual power that sustained caste and racial hegemony.²⁷ The co-existence of prohibitions against marriage and the persistence of illicit sexual union is an important paradox in understanding the profound anxieties about sexuality and caste purity that issues of caste and gender raise, and clearly, there are resonances between structures of caste and race here. However, while dalits, African-Americans, and women might experience similar forms of dispossession, there are important historical reasons why we might not wish to collapse one into the other.

The essays included in the section *Dalit Women, Difference, and Dalit Women’s Movement* trace the emergence of dalitbahujan women as a recognizable political collectivity. These essays note lower-caste (especially dalit) women’s vulnerability to sexual violence and harassment, i.e., the notion of dalit women as sexual property whose enjoyment falls into an economy of desire and violation at odds with the licit economies that maintain caste purity through marriage; their stigmatization by upper-caste women; and the economic exploitation of their labour. At the same time, the growing visibility of issues of caste, identity, and personhood in Indian political society, as well as the availability of global discourses of human rights violation and access to mass-mediated critical publics have highlighted the specific forms of gendered violence that dalit women experience. I have suggested that two broad movements are visible in the recent writing on the political strategies and forms of redress that dalit women have sought: the repeated insistence on the forms of triple-subjugation and vulnerability that lower-caste (especially dalit) women suffer, and the appeal to transnational fora for representing dalit issues. I have argued that testimonial forms of representation and

autonomous political organizations provide dalit women with an important vehicle for fighting caste-based gender injustice, while allowing them to point to the limits of feminist organizing around caste issues. In the next section I explore the set of historical occlusions as a result of which caste and gender came to follow separate historical trajectories.

Histories of reform

Important work by feminist historians has shown that caste was consistently occluded from the agenda of “social reform” in India. Throughout the course of the nineteenth-century gender reform seemed to address solely upper-caste women, thereby rendering their experiences normative. Beginning with the debates about the abolition of sati in 1829, the reform movements’ attention to practices such as the maintenance of widows as domestic drudges, child marriage, and the education of women, focused solely on upper-caste women and their lives. Scholars have focused on the colonial state as a crucial arbiter in the politicization of caste and the interest in social reform. Instead of taking at face value colonial discourses about non-interference in the “personal” realm, historians of gender have drawn a great deal on the law as a particularly salient symbolic site where patriarchy was reconstituted. In opposition to the reigning bourgeois conceptions of the private as the realm of freedom and interiority, the colonial state in India understood the private sphere in the colony as the space of a “barbaric” tradition that required redemption. This produced the structure of the “scandal” or the “crisis” as the mode through which the private sphere was made available to public scrutiny. I would argue that the colonial production of “public” and “private” was itself a public performance of colonial power.

Colonial law’s significance lay in its uneven and ambivalent effects. For instance legal reform over the course of the nineteenth century reinforced caste distinctions that were in fact more fluid than Anglo-Indian law understood them to be.²⁸ Moreover, law occupied the public sphere by invoking the disciplinary structures of the state. Colonial law’s intervention in matters of sexual propriety and caste morality strengthened the sovereignty the colonial state claimed for itself. The colonial state used the categories of

“culture” and “tradition” to buttress its own claims to being an improving, modernizing force, as well as to disable or dispossess natives from claiming parity with their colonizers. Gendered conceptions of tradition were used to reconfirm earlier forms of patriarchal control. Yet at the same time, traditional forms of social life were themselves being changed due to modern conceptions of agency, consent, and individuality.

Important essays by Uma Chakravarti, V.S. Kadam (1988), and Rosalind O’Hanlon (1991) have suggested a significant ideological rupture between the Peshwai, a precolonial brahminical state, and the colonial regime in western India. Read along with the essays included in this section by historians of gender who have worked on south India, they suggest that caste and social reform articulated in very explicit ways in these regions, rendering the debates that took place here over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries of particular interest to scholars and activists interested in the development of radical caste politics as well as critiques of gender relations. As well such regional histories give pause to any attempts to generalize about either caste or gender relations across India, and de-emphasize the focus on Bengal and north India that persists in much historiography.²⁹

The intricate nature of record-keeping by the Marathas and then the Peshwas in western India has provided historians with a wealth of detail about the adjudication of gender issues by the precolonial Peshwai, and the essay by Kadam offers a detailed look at the differential forms of corporal punishment and the system of fines instituted by the brahminical state of the Peshwai in maintaining the sexual economy of caste.³⁰ Kadam’s article explores the state’s attempts to regulate the caste morality of its subjects through its public (and oftentimes violent) disciplining of women.

Mahatma Jotirao Phule’s critiques of caste relations too drew on the political strength of brahmins in the Peshwai, and the perverted forms of colonial modernity that had further strengthened the power of the upper-castes, the *shetji-bhatji* (or priest-moneylender) combine. Phule’s awareness of the debilitating codes of conduct that disciplined upper-caste women was integral to his critique of caste relations in colonial society, and his school for untouchable girls in 1848 and home for upper-caste widows must

be viewed from that perspective. His challenge to the upper-caste men through a critique of how they treated their women, as well as his empathetic identification with oppressed brahmin and upper-caste women are important.³¹ In fact Phule, along with the radical Tarabai Shinde, though they articulated caste oppression as something experienced by both lower and upper-caste women, focused on the far greater burdens of chastity and caste purity that regulated upper-caste women. The “softer” forms of gendered domination that upper-caste women faced were no less oppressive than the expropriation of manual and sexual labour experienced by lower-caste women.³²

Rosalind O’Hanlon has argued that an emergent colonial public sphere produced new kinds of caste domination during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In their quest for upward mobility, non-brahmin communities sought to emulate upper-caste Hindu ideologies of purity and respectability for women, and tropes of strength and military valour for men. O’Hanlon argues that these communities were “torn between emulating Brahmanic religious values and rejecting them, emphasizing the Kshatriya and twice-born status of a backward-class community brought into new forms of unity and solidarity.” (O’Hanlon, 71) The consolidation of new caste identities as well as the decline of older forms of political society produced in them an ambivalent investment in gender reform. Ideologies of caste purity and middle-class domesticity might have in fact grown stronger, and attracted men (and women) of all castes. At the same time, lower-caste women who were materially dispossessed by casteist and “colonial modern” paradigms of gender regulation might have also found a new language in which to contest their growing marginalization. Briefly put, we might argue that though colonial governance might have rendered certain spheres of Indian society more free by bringing them into the domain of Western progress and improvement, it did so erratically, without great awareness of the contradictory processes it had initiated in indigenous society.

These processes are reflected in Tarabai Shinde’s critique of caste and gender in *Stri-Purush Tulana* (1882). Shinde was both an activist of the Satyashodak Samaj and a critic of the patriarchal norms imposed by non-Brahmin activists who argued that caste

was the main form of social antagonism in Hindu society. Written after an upper-caste widow, Vijayalakshmi, had been convicted of infanticide, *Stri-Purush Tulana* was a critique of gender relations as well as caste, both of which disempowered lower-caste women.³³ This serves to mark Shinde's polemic as one of the first *feminist* critiques of caste. Nevertheless, it was one that anti-colonial nationalists ignored. In Shinde's text the sexual depravity of men was held responsible for women's sexual misadventures, and male cunning and lust were held responsible for women's misfortune. What is more, Shinde's ability to view the sexual economies of marriage and prostitution as reflecting two sides of the same coin showed a keen sense of how the logics of the good wife and the loose woman constituted each other.

It is no coincidence that descriptions of upper-caste restrictions on widow remarriage and the ensuing torment of widows within families inaugurate Shinde's account of the effects of caste and gender ideologies. The enforcement of widowhood showed how caste morality was regulated through gender. Widows became the object of upper and lower-caste reformers' concern over the course of the nineteenth century. Historians of gender have explored the suffocating effects of enforced widowhood on young girls, and analyzed such coercion as a means of regulating women's sexuality. However it is the centrality of widowhood to conceptions of *caste purity* that is really at issue. Widows were at once the target of lower-castes' satire against the upper-caste family sphere; visible symbols of the necessity of social reform for upper-caste reformers; and proof of the correctness of religious strictures against remarriage for conservatives. If earlier debate about sati had raised issues of female agency, I am suggesting that widowhood raised questions about the relationship between regulated sexuality, inheritance, and caste status in the Hindu marriage structure.³⁴

It is important to recognize that the maintenance of caste boundaries was the crucial factor in the ideology of widowhood. Within the upper-caste family, however, the widowed woman was thoroughly dependent and vulnerable.³⁵ Chakravarti argues that labour was extracted from widows by rendering them dependent on the protection of their families. In other words, the "social death" that the widow was threatened with enabled the exploit-

ation of her labour. Therefore the sexual regulation and material expropriation of widowed women came together to render austere widowhood a powerful symbol of upper-caste patriarchy.

Though the widow might be socially “dead,” her presence as a once-married, sexually knowledgeable woman generated anxiety. Such anxiety supported attempts to restrict the freedom of widows within the joint-family household, and sanctioned the drudgery of widows whose work, though it was essential to households, was consistently marginalized. Chakravarti writes “The widow’s institutionalized marginality, a liminal state between being physically alive and being socially dead, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the deprivation of her sexuality as well as her personhood.” (p. 2248) As well, the extraction of the labour of widows by the families who maintained them enabled *other* women’s freedom from toil within the family.³⁶ As Chakravarti argues, though widows were outside the ideologies of marriage and domesticity, they served as a reminder that coercive conceptions of protection and affection were only ever episodically available to women—that these were contingent on the husband’s physical presence. For those within the experiential world of widowhood, the economy of giving or labouring without expectation of return was itself seen as a privilege. From outside its lived logic, however, widowhood is revealed to us as it really was: viz. as a form of material surplus that added to the domestic economy. I would suggest that the widow’s status as a spectre, an inhuman apparition, rendered her labour as pure surplus in this schema. Widowhood therefore becomes a limit-condition for thinking about the constitution of the family. We are able to see clearly its reliance on the labour of women who are themselves ‘surplus’. At the same time, it exemplifies the upper-caste ideologies of sexual purity that kept widows within upper-caste homes and offered them the questionable forms of “protection” whose violence the essays by Chakravarti and O’Hanlon eloquently describe.

However, as O’Hanlon notes in her essay “Issues of Widowhood: Gender, Discourse and Resistance in Colonial Western India,” the growth of “modern” forms of gendered domination within caste communities can also throw into sharp relief the contest *between* men from different communities that access to a

“colonial public sphere” had created. These entangled histories of gender reform led both to a tightening of control over women from lower-caste communities over the nineteenth-century, and to the modernity that upper-caste women began to claim as the fruits of their victory over caste patriarchy. They form the discontinuous and contested narratives that continue to extract their toll in the present configuration caste and gender issues.

Partha Chatterjee, in his influential essay, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman’s Question,”³⁷ argued that the issue of social reform came to an abrupt end in the early twentieth century precisely at that moment when Indian nationalism came to political maturity; that gender issues ceased to be publicly debated (and identified with India’s civilizational status) at the precise moment when nationalism became properly political, focusing on state power. Now this would seem to suggest that both caste and gender issues were deemed unimportant; that Indian nationalism’s focus had to be trained on the state rather than on questions of identity or subjectivity. However, it is impossible to think about Indian nationalism without understanding the constitution of its “others”—Muslims, women, lower castes. These could not properly represent the nation in themselves since they were overburdened by their identities. But this ingenious “resolution” of nationalism’s dilemmas of what to do with its minorities, deemed to be too embedded in their particular identities to be truly “representative”, ought not to be taken at face value as a mode of explanation, as Chatterjee does. Instead it ought to be exposed as nationalism’s own conservatism as it increasingly came to model itself on the colonial state in the shift from an *anti-colonial* to a *state-centric* model. Perhaps Chatterjee’s account ought to be turned on its head, then, if we are to understand why, by the 1930s, nationalism was increasingly troubled by its inability to incorporate its “others” sufficiently into the national imaginary. Furthermore, a rewriting of this period would reveal not the occlusion or the invisibility of the “woman’s question” so much as the *saturation* of discourses of gender in everyday life, as reflected in the early attempts to form semiautonomous women’s political organizations, and in the extensive discussions about the family, marriage, and property (which would culminate in the Hindu Code

Bill). In fact the precise period of social reform's disappearance from the upper-caste agenda is that of its appearance on other agendas—in the emerging political activism of women themselves (whether we wish to call it feminist or not), as well as the debates over the “woman’s question” in anti-caste movements.

I will focus briefly on the emergence of dalit and non-brahmin politics in southern and western India, especially the emergence of B. R. Ambedkar and E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (or Periyar) as figures who launched significant critiques of caste and gender from *outside* Indian nationalism’s discursive frame. In order to do so, however, I will take a slight detour through the emergence of caste critiques of mainstream nationalism, and the publicity around caste issues in southern and western India in order to show the extent to which gender relations were embedded within caste ideologies for both these figures.

In an important analysis of the development of a Gandhian agenda of caste reform as it increasingly came into conflict with autonomous dalit struggles to define a more properly political agenda for dalit freedom, Eleanor Zelliot argued that the Congress resolution of 1917 to remove “all the disabilities imposed by religion and custom upon the Depressed Classes” constituted a new receptivity to the claim that caste fractured national (also read) Hindu unity, facilitating the understanding of untouchability as a national problem and a Gandhian obsession.³⁸ The growing significance of campaigns against “untouchability” for the moral discourse of Hindu unity enunciated by the Congress, and Gandhi’s campaigns of bodily discipline and his empathetic “participation” in the dalit’s experience of defilement have been dated to 1920.³⁹ There were two effects of Gandhian focus on untouchability: 1) It posed the question of Hindu inclusion as a caste issue and a moral problem for the upper-castes, and 2) The public embrace of caste reform by the Congress succeeded in convincing a significant group of dalits that the political question of representation was a more powerful response than the reformist focus on Hindu inclusion.

For instance, B. R. Ambedkar, one of the primary spokespeople for the Depressed Classes, claimed that they had separate political interests, that discrimination against them was experienced as a

civic disability that made them less equal. In the famous debate over separate electorates with Gandhi, as well as in his later writings, *The Annihilation of Caste*, or *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Ambedkar argued that the political recognition of the dalit, rather than religious inclusion in the Hindu community, was the more forceful challenge to caste-Hindu society.

Zelliot's piece "Dr. Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women"* focuses on the importance of an Ambedkarite vision of empowerment and visibility for dalit women. Zelliot, as well as Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, in their "We Made History Too: Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement,"* examine the significance of education, and the public participation of dalit women in collective struggles during Ambedkar's time. Pawar and Moon note the early struggles for devadasi reform, since the devadasi system had made use of "religious" explanations for the sexual abuse of women from dalit communities. There was also Ambedkar's keen support for the organization of women's conferences alongside meetings for men from 1930. The emergence of dalit women leaders such as Shantabai Dani, Sulochana Dongre, and Radhabai Kamble during the 1920s and 1930s was important. It allowed dalit women to actively identify with the larger dalit community when it came to the issue of separate electorates, and their important labours in reforming dalit communities from within. The excerpts from *Pan on Fire** note the significance of Buddhism in changing women's religious subjectivity after Ambedkar's conversion in 1956, as do Pawar and Moon, though the excerpts also indicate the contradictory ways in which dalit women in Maharashtra perform their Buddhism. In a recent essay, Uma Chakravarti (2000) argues that historically existing Buddhism, while providing an important critique of social arrangements and inequality, is better viewed as an imaginative horizon for contemporary dalit Buddhist practices than as a script for social transformation.

In the heyday of dalit mobilization, Ambedkar wrote that inter-marriage was the most important way of annihilating caste, since it alone acknowledged the relationship between the

maintenance of caste purity and the control of women's sexuality. He noted:

There are many Castes which allow inter-dining. But it is a common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of Caste and the consciousness of Caste. I am convinced that the real remedy is inter-marriage. Fusion of blood alone can create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount the separatist feeling—the feeling of being aliens—created by Caste will not vanish. Among the Hindus inter-marriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well-knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. *The real remedy for breaking Caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste.* [emphasis in the original] (Moon, 1979: 67)

This emphasis on the sexual underpinnings of caste society is important, but what is more significant is Ambedkar's acknowledgment of *desire* between castes. For him breaking the caste rules of kinship alone would undo untouchability. If inter-caste marriages were to take place as acts of choice—which they would have to, since caste ideologies did not permit them (there was almost the suggestion that such unions went against nature)—such choice raised the possibility that men and women of different castes might desire each other. For Ambedkar, inter-caste marriage was to be differentiated from the prevalent forms of illicit union that dalit activists had virulently campaigned against. Ambedkar included intercaste marriage in the Hindu Code Bill as *Hindu* marriages rather than as civil marriages registered under the Special Marriages Act.⁴⁰

While Zelliott cautions us against reading Ambedkar as a theorist of the relationship between caste and patriarchy, Pratima Pardeshi argues in her "Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Question of Women's Liberation in India,"* that the woman's question was critical to Ambedkar. I would argue that the political language of rights and representation that had come to dominate dalit

struggles at this point rendered the language of law and constitutionalism an important site for advocating changes within the structures of caste and gender.⁴¹ For instance Ambedkar's Hindu Code Bill was both revolutionary and reformist in its attempts to deal with women's status in society. It was revolutionary because it sought to conjoin different aspects of women's oppression under the rubric of a reformed Hindu personal law, yet as our prior examination of attempts to homogenize questions of rights illustrates, this might have had the effect of dispossessing certain women of rights, real and virtual. In fact the piecemeal passage of the Hindu Code Bill "in spirit" after Ambedkar's resignation as Law Minister rendered the Hindu community the most "progressive" in its treatment of women, a fact that came back to haunt debates about the Uniform Civil Code during the 1990s.

If Ambedkar's faith was in the state as redeemer of the injustices of Indian society, Periyar's lay in a radical critique of civil society. The centrality of the woman's question for Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, begun in 1925, has been emphasized by V. Geetha in "Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship."* The very term "self respect" indicates the utopian vision of a casteless and perhaps atheist society based on human dignity and self worth. Periyar had been a staunch Congressite and a supporter of Congress until 1925 when he broke away to launch the Self-Respect Movement, or *Suyamariyadai Iyakkam*.⁴²

Geetha's focus on an ethical practice that eludes the political containment of Periyar's vision is important, because it produces Periyar as a philosophical figure, one who was a negative image of Gandhi. Gandhi sought to saturate civil society with what we might call a coercive vision of a community-of-discipline. His practices centered on resignifying the intimate spheres of Indian society-relations of gender, attitudes to filth and cleanliness, bodily comportment and the practices of sexual intercourse and defecation, to name a few. Periyar's response to the Gandhian attempt to saturate civil society with idioms of religiosity was to use reason and rationality to counter caste cunning, much as Phule had done almost fifty years earlier. Gendered forms of behavior were the primary sites where religious ritual exercised its hegemony, and it is no surprise that Periyar too sought to produce

what we might today call a feminist critique of civil society. Mentioning the adi-dravida activist Anapoorani who was married to an upper-caste non-Brahmin, Geetha argues that it was the self-respect marriage that posed the greatest challenge to caste orthodoxy, much as widow reform has exposed, to upper-caste reformers, the multiple layers of women's ideological and material suppression.

S. Anandhi's explicit focus in "Women's Question in Dravidian Movement c. 1925–1948,"* on self-respect (or *suyamariyadai*) unions allows us to see the significance of these attempts to critique the gender hierarchies inherent in the structure of the Hindu marriage, and thereby to thoroughly *politicize* marriage. The restructuring of marriage as ritual also provided an alternative idiom of austerity or frugality, which could then function as an implicit moral critique of the financial burdens of weddings that the woman's family bore. Minakshi's exhortations in *Kudi Arasu* against lavish marriages that placed families in debt and against women's investment in meaningless ritual testify to this reformist move (see V. Geetha, WS-12) The SRM's attempts to reduce the financial burden of weddings was connected to the attempts to rethink marriage itself as a partnership of two political comrades who had decided to marry, relieving families of any part in the performance of the marriage. Relying on the witnessing of political comrades, doing away with the Brahmin priest and the tying of the *tali*, and arranging the wedding ceremony at times considered inauspicious according to the Hindu almanac, Self-Respect Marriages questioned the nexus between marriage and religious ritual. The similarity between a self-respect marriage and a political gathering was meant to counter, spectacularly, the concept of marriage as merely a form of intimacy. The use of Self-Respect slogans and banners to adorn cinemas and other public places where Self-Respect marriages took place, and the exchange of "vows" that sought to respect the public and political lives of Self-Respect activists as much as it sought to re-imagine their private lives as one of mutual desire, challenged caste orthodoxy.

As with symbolic refusals of Hinduism's faux "humanism"—one thinks of Ambedkar's burning of the Manusmriti in Mahad in 1927, or the publication of his *Riddles of Hinduism*, or Periyar's

garlanding of religious figures with chappals—the attack on marriage undermined the religious foundations of everyday life and exposed the saturation of casteist discourses in the public sphere.⁴³ Self-Respect Marriages went beyond such symbolic action, however, in posing a challenge to the sexual relations that sustained caste patriarchy. Rethinking intimacy involved an attempt to make use of legal claims to equality and recognition, yet it also addressed issues of pleasure and sexuality quite directly. Anandhi mentions Periyar's extraordinary ideas about birth control, "There is a basic difference between our insistence on birth control and other's notion of birth control . . . They have only thought of family and national welfare through birth control. But we are only concerned about women's health and women's independence through birth control." (cited in S. Anandhi, p. 27)⁴⁴ Periyar's attempts to integrate caste and gender issues politically through the form of the Self-Respect marriage lead to imaginings of a different future, one where issues of caste, gender, and sexuality could be reconfigured and rearranged for the mutual respect and pleasure of men and women.

The colonial and nationalist configurations of gender had been attentive to the social reform of upper-caste practices and the enablement of "modern" upper-caste subjectivities. I have traced a brief history of the transformations of the "woman's question" as it related to the structures of colonial legality and nationalist investment in the "new woman," and contrasted them with another history, the critiques of issues of marriage, the permission to divorce, and the sexual autonomy of women, by anti-caste movements. This contrast provides a keen sense of the radically divergent social and political contexts within which gender issues were raised. I have identified the mainstream production of social reform as an upper-caste issue, as well as the discourses of caste critique that politicized and empowered lower-caste and dalit women. In this way I have traced the divergent histories of caste and gender, one stream animated by the project of upper-caste freedom, the other by the critique of caste exploitation, which provide us with the conditions of possibility for imagining political futures.

Voice, violence, and the labours of the feminine

The recent scholarship on the complex relationship between the regulation of caste and gender purity has led to the argument that women are embraced by “multiple patriarchies” distinguished by the customary practices of caste and religious communities.⁴⁵ They suggest that gendering must be embedded within the larger economies of affect and accumulation, i.e., patriarchal situations, which produce different effects on women from diverse caste communities. Such scholarly efforts have resonated with arguments by dalitbahujan feminists about the homogenizing (and ultimately debilitating) effects of brahminical conceptions of the family, sexuality, and femininity. Such a position is articulated by the extract from Kancha Ilaiah’s *Why I Am Not a Hindu*.^{*} Such studies illuminate the production of new forms of inequality amongst women by projects of gender reform, and suggest that gender justice will need to be reconceptualized as dispersed and multiply inflected by the prevalent forms of gender inequality within caste communities. The disaggregation of monolithic conceptions of patriarchy is to be applauded as a shift away from systemic to processual conceptions of gender relations, and stands to reopen questions of how exactly we understand the term patriarchy. However such attempts also tend to posit idealized notions of dalitbahujan women’s sexual freedom and access to the public sphere that go counter to dalitbahujan women’s experiences of caste-based, yet sexually overdetermined forms of violence and exploitation.

Typically, the empirical investigation of kinship relations, village economies, symbolic practices, etc. by disciplinary sociologists (in India) and anthropologists (in the west, especially cultural anthropologists in the United States) facilitated an understanding of the contingent and diverse forms of familial and kinship organization that regulated gender ideologies and women’s sexuality.⁴⁶ While such work extensively documented the exchange of women and their role in cementing alliances between men, they rarely reflected on the historical contexts and political consequences of such synchronic and descriptively oriented caste and community studies.

Leela Dube’s essay “Caste and Gender”^{*} examines the gendered structures that caste practices rely upon. Dube writes “the unequal

distribution of resources and exploitative relations of production can be understood only through an enquiry into the principles of kinship governing allocation of resources, devolution of rights to property, rights to services, and entitlements." Along with this, Dube argues, are the rules regarding the performance of caste-based labour, and ultimately the gendered regulation of sexuality. The production of gender and caste through cultural rules or norms is significantly enhanced, Dube argues, by dowry. "The pressures of endogamy compel them [middle-class families] to stick to arranged marriages and trap them in negotiations with a premium on dowry." The symbolic giving and taking of women is complemented by the system of dowry that further benefits wife-takers rather than wife-givers. If women deprive their natal families of economic resources while serving as important gateways for reproducing caste ideology, men seem to be able to bypass caste and familial injunctions altogether in their relations with lower-caste or dalit women. "Men have institutionalized mechanisms to escape the incurrence of pollution through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman," Dube notes. While women are debilitated by the performance of religious ritual that further confirms their caste status, men can make use of those same rituals in escaping caste impurity!

Mary John mentions in her review* of Karin Kapadia's book, *Siva's Sisters*, that the analyses of kinship or village communities, while useful in producing detailed accounts of caste practices, have not been particularly attentive to matters of historical mediation or the changed forms of political subjectivity that governmental tactics have produced. Hence sociological categories of analysis seem to suffer from the effects of objectification,⁴⁷ in that they establish a correspondence between methods of analysis and data produced, while disallowing the play of contingency, politics, and an interrogation of the ethics of such practice. Sociological studies that look to the statistical regularity of certain practices, or examine ritual or symbolic acts from a synchronic perspective that produces the "evidence" of sociology or anthropology, should be complemented by archivally grounded studies of practices that might otherwise be assumed to be invariant.

Such sociological models of distanced research stand in

opposition to much recent feminist anthropological thinking that has tended towards self-reflexivity, especially when written from U.S. contexts, sometimes indulging in forms of liberal guilt and self-flagellation that do not critique the symbolic and material reproduction of gender relations. Perhaps Indian feminism too is guilty of holding a set of un-interrogated assumptions about whom it speaks for, who forms its constituency, and the life-worlds and situations it assumes as normative while developing strategies for feminist intervention. If so, how may we productively explore the model of anthropologist and native informant as a heuristic for understanding the awkward relationship between Indian feminism and dalit women?

The dialogic model of encounter, with its attendant investment in civility, respect, and ethical transaction has been a strong framework for interrogating the ethnographic encounter as a form of unmediated, transparent engagement with cultural "others." While such naïve notions of "access" and "experience" have been thoroughly criticized, I want to draw attention to the transactive, dialogic model on which such assumptions rest. We might be led to ask what happens for instance, when such relations grounded in presence and physical intimacy are compared with the testimonial and autobiographical form through which much recent dalit writing appears. We are led to conclude that these are two distinctly different models of witnessing, and that there are significant differences in their representational registers and ethical effects.

R.S. Khare (1998) has noted the strategic forgetting that accompanies memory-work and self-representation for dalit women. In a moment of candour, an upper-caste woman tells him

When we see them their defiling body comes to the fore. . . . As we pass each other in the same neighbourhood we gather our garments to avoid their physical contact. I know it should not be this way especially in today's India, but it still often is.

Dalit women's struggles for self-worth and dignity in the face of such a blatant denial of gendered identification must surely give pause to anyone convinced of the transformative possibilities of dialogue in promoting empathy. Khare suggests in his

essay, in fact, that structures of denial and forgetting, accompanied by highly politicized and embodied practices of self-definition, allow dalit women to escape the debilitating effects of this kind of upper-caste sentiment.

Even the title of Majid Siddiqi's review of *Viramma* (2000), "The Subaltern Speaks,"* indicates the reviewer's admiration for a text that would seem to represent the dalit woman as herself, in her own words. M.S.S. Pandian, by contrast, complicates such notions in his review of Bama's autobiography, *Karukku*, "On a Dalit Woman's Testimonio,"* by suggesting that such writing might function more along the lines of working-class autobiographies in the West, for instance, that seemed to produce a collective record of struggle and militancy, as opposed to the interiority of the individual. Pandian notes the blurred boundaries between novel and autobiography in Bama's account as a refusal to privilege individual self-fashioning and specificity. "To name is to exercise power. But a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity." The categories named by practices of state identification are counterposed against the narration of the "we" of a community of struggle and suffering. This sociological function of being witness to a collective dalit identity must, however, be complicated by the questions of ethics and aesthetics that inform any "new" literary form.

Dalit women writers have criticized the masculine register of *dalit sahitya*,⁴⁸ and there is a strong body of women's writing that has emerged.⁴⁹ Some autobiographical narration speaks of estrangement from the community. Pandian notes Bama's growing alienation from her community inserted into an upper-caste world, thus producing a profoundly doubled identity for the educated dalit woman that *Viramma*, for instance, seems not to experience.

Viramma, and the women whose oral histories are excerpted here from an early endeavor to record dalit women's lives, *Pan on Fire*, repeatedly evoke the worlds of labour and scarcity that regulate their days, as does the extraordinary Kaminibai, in Gail Omvedt's interview "The Downtrodden Among the Downtrodden; An Interview with a Dalit Agricultural Labourer."* In that early essay, Omvedt faulted sociology for its failure to produce qualitative accounts of economic dispossession and gendered

labour, i.e., to go beyond the statistical enumeration of dalit women as agricultural labourers and wage workers. But even in Omvedt's account, there is just one moment when her narrative moves away from a description of women's hyper-exploited labour, to the symbolic register of caste deprivation *as such*. This arises when Kaminabai responds to a question from Omvedt's companion, a young dalit male activist. When he asks "do these other people—Kunbis, Marathas—practice casteism against you," Kaminibai replies "They do, but we don't have to bother about that. We have our own pots and drink from them, we don't bother. We are not going to drink water from their hands. Now they don't do it very much." The impoverishment of dalit communities is connected to landlessness as well as their socially stigmatized status.

The journalist P. Sainath's reports on dalit daily life published in *The Hindu* of which I have included "Unmusical Chairs," and "Head-loads and Heartbreak,"* investigated the condition of dalits across the country, offering vivid accounts of the perverse forms of sociality that constitute the perpetuation of untouchability today.⁵⁰ Sainath's investigative pieces appear in the form of "dispatches from the field" that testify to dalits' ongoing struggles for human dignity and recognition. The essay on women in Rajasthan who carry night-soil brutally evokes the cycle of exchange (a roti for the removal of shit) that brings dalit women within upper-caste homes. It examines the production of poverty and class exploitation through ideologies that legitimate women's performance of defiling labour. The upper-castes' resolute refusal to enact the laws abolishing the carrying of night-soil, or even to provide dalit women with equipment that would render the cleaning of latrines a *job* (rather than caste-specific, defiling labour), exhibits their callousness. We are made aware of the vulnerability of these women to poor health and infection, the existential condition of "uncleanliness."⁵¹

In "Of Land and Dalit Women,"* Kancha Ilaiah addresses dalits' lack of access to land and property, rather than their conditions of labouring. Ilaiah notes an heroic attempt by women in the village of Maddur in Andhra Pradesh, to establish their right to common land at all costs where they risked physical violence at the hands of the dominant castes of the village operating in

cahoots with the police establishment.⁵² Ilaiah's account is an illustration of a struggle by dalits that has translated caste dispossession into a form of economic deprivation, a hunger for land inaugurated by dalit women and supported by a radical left organization.⁵³ The material transformations of caste relations—effected through wage equity, an end to stigmatized work, the cessation of sexual harassment, political empowerment—touch upon dalit women's *access to both material and symbolic capital*. It might be helpful to view questions of capital as inextricably tied to issues of capacity. Dalit disenfranchisement and the debilitating aspects of dalit women's embodiment are in fact at the heart of how we might think capital and capacity together.⁵⁴

I would argue that legal narratives provide a form of representation and publicity that convert these manifestations of material exploitation and disenfranchisement into vulnerability. The Prevention of Atrocities Against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (or PoA) Act produces such sexual vulnerability as *a* (if not *the* most) significant aspect of dalit sexed subjectivity. However it does so not through an especial focus on the dalit woman, but in the ways in which her identity is contingent on the (partial) humanity of dalits in general. Section 3(1) (xii) notes that the forceful attempt to dishonour or outrage a dalit woman's modesty constitutes an atrocity. Only when it is read along with Section 3(1) (iii) which notes that stripping or parading a dalit, or committing any similar act "derogatory to human dignity" is justiciable, does the former retain a sense of the overdetermined significance of sexual violation for dalit women. Otherwise this formulation could be a caste-neutral and gender-sensitive position. My essay in this volume "Understanding Sirasgaon"* explores the nexus between law, violence, and dalit identity through an examination of the troubled forms of visibility (rooted in vulnerability) that law produces for dalit women. It is precisely the contingent naming of the dalit woman based on two models of collectivity, one organized around the concept of "sexual difference," and the other organized around that of stigma, that produces her subjectivity.⁵⁵ These issues relate to the metaphor of touch as it relates to sexual desire, violence, and the dalit woman's body.⁵⁶

The stripping and parading of women works at the level of

ritual shaming and humiliation, and as a lesson to dalit men who would transgress the regulatory codes of sexual desire. This is also evident in accounts of Chunduru by the Kannabirans "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence,"* as well as the report by the Joint Action Committee, "Negotiating Caste and Gender: Struggle in a Central University." But what is more, it is the setting to work of law's own violence of recognition, as I argue in my essay, which turns an act of gendered violation into a "case" that mobilizes bureaucratic structures of redress.⁵⁷ The crisis of definition that marks Sirasgaon as an event is symptomatic of the limits and paradoxes of a form of liberal politics of affirmative action and compensation that reinforces precisely the categories of cultural identification (or in this case, caste vulnerability) that it had recognized as a legitimate form of political identity. The redress of certain forms of historic "injury," then, also substantiates precisely those forms of difference that it sought to erase. As Judith Butler has argued, forms of linguistic vulnerability are both the grounds of recognition (being called a name is one of the ways in which the subject is constituted in language) as well as the grounds of injury (being insulted or injured by the name).⁵⁸

I also suggest, in this essay, that the parading of the women was an act of violation that illuminated the structures of the dalit family and the relations of need and desire that implicate dalit families in the consolidation of upper-caste domesticity. This issue is raised with some force at the end of the Kannabirans' essay when they mention the unacknowledged relationships that exist between upper-caste women and lower-caste men, or the adoption of eve-teasing by dalit boys as a mode of transgressing caste boundaries. Tharu's essay "The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body"* problematizes the possibility of reading dalit women's desire by setting it against the possibilities of upper-caste women's fulfillment as a response to their historical deprivation. Hence plenitude and a joyous experience of her body characterizes the grandmother, the sublated "past" of a secular, brahminical feminism. Terror and violence, on the other hand, constitute the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the desirable dalit female subject. Embedded in the marks of caste and its disfigurement, this subject is recognized in and through

her body. Tharu suggests that the gendered subject of "feminism" produced by narratives of upper-caste autonomy, secular identity, and unencumbered freedom cannot enter the life-world of the dalit wife/widow, for instance. She argues that the histories of modernity and female empowerment encounter their limits when they confront the presents of the dalit family and its utter degradation. Are brahmin and dalit women's embodiments so radically at odds with each other that it is the experience of what Tharu calls the "caste mark" that is ultimately the grounds of gendered identity? Is gender all caste, then?

This, it seems to me, is the current challenge of thinking caste and gender together. How may we respect the burgeoning forces of democratic discourses of rights and recognition that have produced new imaginative possibilities for rethinking political society, at the same time that we recognize the sites of inequality that seem to be ever more dispersed in our midst? Facts like the erecting of statues of Ambedkar, Periyar, and Phule in Lucknow when the BSP was in power in Uttar Pradesh; Mayawati's position as the first dalit woman to become Chief Minister, and the public and symbolic inauguration of a new politics of the dispossessed must all be attentive to Sharad Patil's critique of conceiving politics too narrowly as the politics of parliamentary democracy, in his "Democracy Brahminical and Non-Brahminical" (1995). At a juncture when segments of the dalit and adivasi community are showing themselves amenable to being reclaimed by a dangerous and violent form of Hindutva, and democratic processes and state institutions seem to have capitulated to majoritarian conceptions of the "popular will," an uninterrogated faith in democratic politics is problematic. Ambedkar's attempts to deploy multiple discourses to address the complexities of caste and untouchability veer between his "experiment" with religious conversion and the attempt to strengthen the postcolonial state's ameliorative function, for instance. At the same time, Sainath's account in "Unmusical Chairs"* of a dalit woman sarpanch's repeated attempts to evade the excess of upper-caste legality (such as the roadblocks put up by the panchayat officer who has access to written records) in the interest of social justice, ought to serve as a powerful reminder of the futility of struggling for the rights

guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. This is a powerful and expansive instrument that inaugurates new possibilities and political futures, as much as it seeks to preserve the prevalent norms of civility and fairness.

Claude Lefort has argued that democracy is the inauguration of “the people” as the empty place of power, a place-holder.⁵⁹ This is a powerful political imaginary that also produces “the human” as the political remainder of ideologies of freedom. If the gendered caste subject partakes uneasily of this imputed humanity, the disciplinary identification of her subject-position suggests that she is both an extraordinary citizen-subject and an impoverished one. This more than/less than formulation of dalit sexed subjectivity ought to throw into question the processes of equalization that are powerfully demanded by dalits and the dispossessed, and suggest that cultural problems of recognition interrupt the political practices of rights-talk. This formulation also suggests that we rethink the relationship between two powerful ideologies that focus on the body and its symbolic presence in social space as their points of departure—caste and gender.

Whether it be the demand for the visibility of suffering, the struggles for basic survival and economic rights to property, the critiques of caste Hindu society enabled by cultural and religious practices of conversion to Buddhism, or the political demands for equality and self-determination, dalit and lower-caste women’s issues push the limits of Indian feminism’s location in upper-caste subjectivities. Furthermore, critiques of caste offer a deep and wide-reaching critique of state and civil society that feminism must ally with if it is to think beyond its limited address to the state for protection. By exploring a set of critical texts that provide a provisional genealogy of how we might read caste and gender together, what kinds of issues a renewed feminist politics of difference must address, I hope this volume will provide some indications of the difficult task ahead, even if no final answers.

New York, April 22, 2002

Notes

- * All references in this introduction to articles included in this volume have been identified with an*. Others have been footnoted in the usual way.

- ¹ Raji Sunder Rajan has read this essay many times over and offered generous support and critical advice. I cannot thank her enough for her labours. Janaki Bakhle, Riyad Koya, Mani Limbert, Steven Pierce, and Arvind Rajagopal offered critical comments and suggestions especially Riyad Koya, who offered detailed comments not all of which I have been able to incorporate here. I am grateful to Mary John for her comments and suggestions on the first draft of this essay. My thanks as well to Antoinette Burton, Geraldine Forbes, Mrinalini Sinha and Susie Tharu for their encouraging readings and suggestions. Eleanor Zelliot was generous as always with my requests for information, and allowed us to publish her as-yet-unpublished piece on Ambedkar and women. Geetika De was a wonderful long-distance research assistant—creative, helpful, and intellectually engaged with many of the issues this volume considers. I am most grateful for her helpful suggestions and all her hard work.
- ² There had been two conferences of the NFDW in Maharashtra (Dhule, Mumbai), three in Delhi, and two in Chennai by May 2001. Mentioned in Thorat (2001): 12. There is also the All India Dalit Women's Forum established in 1994, and Dalit Solidarity, established in 1995, in addition to the many local and regional dalit women's groups. There has also been a session devoted to issues confronting dalit women at the National Women's Activist Conference since 1994. The second issue of the newly-launched English journal, *the dalit* (March–April, 2002) carries a special issue on "Dalit Feminism," where essays by Pratima Pardeshi and Rekha Thakur argue for examining caste patriarchies, and critiques of caste and gender that lie outside mainstream feminism.
- ³ Bhagwat (1995): 1.
- ⁴ Guru writes "[T]he autonomous mobilization of women can also be understood from an epistemological standpoint. This perspective maintains that the less powerful members of society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others." Because the dalit or subaltern exemplifies, *precisely in her subalternity*, the multiple forms of her oppression, the epistemological position of self-recovery or understanding is seen to be consonant with a critique of power. This stands in some distinction, however, to the arguments of the political thinker Antonio Gramsci, who argued that perspective of the dominated is necessarily contradictory and fractured; a doubled or negative consciousness that must both acknowledge the force and power of elite (or in this case, upper-caste) domination in real and symbolic terms, while struggling to maintain the critical distance necessary for defining oneself against such homogenizing attempts. See e.g., *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988 for readings (and critiques) of subaltern consciousness.
- ⁵ Vimal Thorat has questioned the reluctance of feminists and dalit activists in probing the specificity of dalit women's experiences, and offers a

more sobering reflection on the intellectual and organizational work to be done to have both movements recognize dalit women's issues *as such*. She argues "Dalit identity politics articulates caste identity sharply but resists, deliberately, understanding and articulating the gender dimensions of caste itself (that sees all women not just Dalit women) in a certain light." And later, "Like the rest of the left movement [for the feminist movement] caste gets subsumed in class inequality. They all have an allergy to study Ambedkar!" Thorat, 2001:12.

- ⁶ The demographic characterization of the bahun samaj as those who were neither "shetji" nor "bhatji" is to be found in Mahatma Jotirao Phule's writings, and echoes the characterization of "the subaltern" as the demographic difference between colonized elites and colonial administrators in the work of the Subaltern Studies collective. For an examination of Phule's extraordinary characterization of the *sudra-atisudra* as both an ethical category as well as a demographic one, see O'Hanlon (1985). Kancha Ilaiah's categorization of the dalitbahujan in his work would seem to replicate such an earlier formulation. See Ilaiah (1996).
- ⁷ See Galanter (1984), for an account of the legislation of reservations since Independence.
- ⁸ For an example of work that charts the genealogies of Indian feminism and feminist politics through an extended consideration of theoretical debates generated by "third wave" feminism and critiques by women of colour in the United States, see John (1996).
- ⁹ See Patel (1984): 177–179.
- ¹⁰ Datar (1999). See also Velankar (1998).
- ¹¹ The hazards of embourgeoisement for dalits has been described by Guru (2000). See also Nigam (2000), an account of the Bhopal Declaration which seeks to go beyond narrow job reservations in the public sector, in actively advocating the promotion of diversity and the infusion of capital into dalit-bahujan businesses, as well as the re-distribution of land.

Clearly this is also a much broader question about distinguishing earlier Marxisant analyses of caste exploitation as class-like in character, from the current attempt to distinguish caste's history from its reduction to a primitive form of class contradiction. The issue is much too broad to enter here, and space constraints prohibit me from enlarging on this point adequately, by drawing on the debates about historical "transition" within which such discussions are embedded. For a unique and provocative examination of precisely this problematic, see Patil (1982).

- ¹² Agamben (1998) uses this term to signify the (impossible) body which is outside politics.
- ¹³ Especially notable for their absence are studies by sociologists of caste and kinship practices that serve to highlight the extent to which such practices are regionally-specific and localized, helping to explain the regional variations and the different levels of politicization one currently finds amongst dalit-bahujan women and feminists more generally, when it comes

to analyses of caste. These studies were much too long to be included in this reader given constraints of space. I am grateful to Mary John for drawing my attention to the necessity of specifying the regional configurations of feminist activism.

The suggestion that caste was territorially bounded and embedded in structures of kingship can be found in Dumont (1986). For an important critique of Dumontian sociology, and an argument about the relationship between caste relations and power, see Dirks (1987).

- 14 See "Women Writing the Nation," introduction to Tharu and Lalitha (1993): 43–116 for an important account of how issues affecting women and the development of Indian feminism have related to broader postcolonial socio-political contexts, as well as the history of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism in the subcontinent. In addition, Tharu and Niranjana (1996) as well as John (1998) illuminate the transformation in Indian feminism during the 1990s.

- 15 This is drastically different, of course, from standard arguments that caste's post-colonial transformations have involved its further politicization through vote bank politics. The unfortunate effect of such arguments about caste's essential destructiveness for the conduct of modern politics, renders "caste politics" the preserve and practice of the lower-castes. For instance, historians have suggested that caste, like religious identity, constituted a particular form of "difference" that came to be hypostatized or frozen during the colonial period as an essential characteristic of Indian society; one that rendered it fissiparous and divisive, caught in the peculiar bind between its religio-ritual prescriptions and its manifestation as "hierarchy" in social and political life. See e.g., Dirks (2001). For an argument about what it would mean to explore contemporary society from a dalitbahujan perspective, see Ilaiah (1998).

Another group of scholars who have examined the emergence of caste movements for upward mobility as well as more radical critiques of the politico-economic effects of caste have analyzed the consolidation of "caste" as a particularly problematic (political) category over the course of the twentieth century. See Bandhopadhyay (1990), Geetha (1998), Gokhale (1993), Gore (1993), Jones (1976), Menon (1994), O'Hanlon (1985), Omvedt (1976), Omvedt (1994), Pandian (1993), Prakash (1990), Prashad (2000), Zelliott (1969).

- 16 A sample of such writings might include: Guru (1994); Patil (1995); *Seminar* issue "Reserved Futures," No. 375, 1990; Varshney (2000): 3–25; Yadav (2000).
- 17 After Partition, the postcolonial state has been fully involved in the "dalit question." By 1950 the Indian constitution abolished untouchability and nominally accepted that dalits were equal citizens who had suffered historic discrimination. In fact, legislators in Parliament went even further, and argued that defining untouchability was itself the perpetration of a stigmatized identity from which dalits were seeking to escape. The

perpetuation of untouchability has come to constitute a national wound, a moral embarrassment that accompanies discourses of self-hood. (Rao, forthcoming) For the postcolonial state, issues of caste and untouchability have been visible as "social evils" on the one hand, and as forms of inequality that have called up practices of "compensatory discrimination" on the other, and allowed "caste" to displace "religious minorities" as the most important identity for thinking minoritarianism. See Bajpai (1999) for an account of the gradual disappearance of Muslims as protected "religious minorities" in the CAD. See also the extended conversation between Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau where the latter argues that it is the logic of equalization (not the commitment to formal equality) that might be understood as the modality whereby difference/forms of incommensurability are rendered commensurable. Butler and Laclau (1997): 3–19.

- ¹⁸ The demands for the Women's Reservation Bill, or the 81st amendment appeared in 1996 on the heels of initiatives at the panchayat and zilla parishads to expand women's participation in local government. It is important to note that women's organizations began mobilizing in a concerted fashion around the issue of increased women's participation at the national level after a series of changes were already underway at the local level. See Datta (1998).

For the debate about reservations for women, see: John (2000): WS22–WS29. See also Kishwar (2000): 4151–56, and Menon (2000): 3835–44. Forbes (1996) notes that women claimed that they did not want (nor need) the "special provisions" available to minorities. For instance, the colonial state understood minoritarian identity through the figure of the dalit and the Muslim. For the postcolonial state in India, the caste subject would become the site for working through the logic of what Marc Galanter has called "compensatory discrimination," the set of entitlements and protections that are meant to equalize unequal subjects. Galanter, 1984.

Since there is to be a separate reader devoted to the issue of reservations for women, I will not delve further into this here, but to suggest that the issue of reservations for dalit, Backward Class, and Other Backward Class women indexes precisely those anxieties about lower castes' investment in caste identity, and exposes the fissures between women's "interests" that the colonial debates about reservations for women sought to keep at bay.

- ¹⁹ Joan Scott has argued that feminism's peculiar paradox of recognition consists in the fact that discourses of "difference" have been constitutive of women (and feminism's) entry into politics. This revolves around the claim to an universal right to politics in the name of gender difference; the assertion of a kind of particularism that both *disables* women, yet ought to be *protected* as the very grounds of their identity. See Scott (1996).
- ²⁰ Dhareshwar (1993): 121.
- ²¹ See especially "Attacks on Dalit Women: A Pattern of Impunity," http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/India_994-11.htm.

- 22 The report takes up specific instances of mass violence against dalits in different parts of India through extensive documentation and interviews with upper-caste perpetrators, administrators, police, civil liberties activists, and dalit victims. The report is organized according to a litany of violent acts that span different states, but focus mainly on the past decade: the "encounter killings" of activists affiliated with the various Marxist-Leninist underground parties functioning in the state of Bihar, and the targeting of dalits who have joined these organizations in the interest of sheer survival against situations of bonded labour and debt peonage; the rape and brutal torture of women as specifically gendered forms of maintaining upper-caste hegemony in places like Bihar and Tamil Nadu; the killing of ten protesters and the wounding of many others in a riot that took place in a Bombay slum after a statue of the prominent dalit leader Babasaheb Ambedkar, a dalit figure of near-mythical status for anti-caste activists, was desecrated; the perpetuation of stigmatized forms of labour such as scavenging; the targeting of dalit activists, and the specific forms of gendered and sexualized exploitation that dalit women are subjected to. *Broken People* focuses on this recent phase in the history of untouchability, yet suggests that such a history of violence is transhistorical. See Rao (2000).
- 23 Dalit groups distinguished the experience of racism from the biological concept of race, and availed themselves of a broad and expansive conception of "racism" that allowed them to mobilize against many forms of historic discrimination, labour exploitation, social stigmatization, and vulnerability to forms of physical and symbolic violence. Constraints of space prohibit me from venturing further here into the potential and perils of revisiting the caste-as-race debates, and in mentioning the debates that the WCAR generated amongst dalit activists and intellectuals in India both in the press and academic journals. See e.g., *Seminar* 508, "Exclusion: A Symposium on Caste, Race and the Dalit Question," December 2001.
- 24 National Federation of Dalit Women NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, World Conference Against Racism, 28 August–7 September, 2001, Durban, South Africa.
- 25 Jacques Derrida writes "Such an act [of declaration] does not come back to a constative or descriptive discourse. It performs, it accomplishes, it does what it says it does: that at least would be its intentional structures," (p. 8) and later in this short piece on the American *Declaration of Independence*, "One cannot decide—and that's the interesting thing, the force and the coup of force of this act—whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance." (p. 9). Derrida (1986): 15.
- 26 See also Internet sites such as www.ambedkar.org, to take just one example.
- 27 This essay problematizes the distinction between code and substance that animated early studies such as those by David Schneider. See Schneider

(1968). I will discuss the sociological or anthropological study of kinship as an important site for the production of caste later in this essay.

- ²⁸ Though it is not included in this volume, mention must be made of Lucy Carroll's essay on the 1856 Widow Remarriage Act. In the interest of enlarging upper-caste women's rights, the Act homogenized the meaning of marriage and produced new forms of dependence for lower-caste women who were cut off from inheritance and maintenance rights if they remarried. In fact the Act reproduced a bourgeois Victorian strategy of symbolically empowering women while distancing them from material power. What the Act offered women, in fact, was the further reliance on legal reform and legislation in protecting their sexually-enabled status as widows who had remarried. This served, of course, to broadcast the form of sexual freedom enabled by remarriage for women while hiding the deeply devastating economic effects of the Act for labouring women and those who had possessed rights to remarriage and divorce prior to the 1856 Act, since Presidency courts often sought to interpret the Act according to textual prescription, rather than allowing custom to dictate in cases involving lower-caste women who were not desbarred from inheriting their first husband's property simply through the fact of remarriage. Carroll (1988). See also Washbrook (1981), Nair (1996), Singha (1998), and Agnes (1999), for accounts of law as a critical site in the performance of gender relations.

- ²⁹ Such histories also need to figure in contemporary feminist accounts, since many dalitbahujan feminist critiques of mainstream feminism have emerged from these areas, enabled by some of the historical conditions of possibility I discuss in my introduction. I thank Mary John for drawing my attention to the regional particularities of such contemporary critiques of feminism. The mapping of such distinctions would take me too far from the specific concerns of this introduction, but it might be useful to explore ethnographic work that can be found in *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India* (ed. Patricia Uberoi) or Thomas Trautmann's *Dravidian Kinship* that suggest that there is a distinction between north India and the south (with western India functioning as a kind of border or frontier zone) with regard to kinship organization, with effects on the regulation of caste as well as gender boundaries. Or else there are arguments about the tri-partite structure of caste in the south and the west that allowed for greater contradictions between the brahminized and labouring castes to emerge from the early modern period, i.e., post-Vijayanagara in the south, and the consolidation of Maratha power in western India.

- ³⁰ See also Guha (1995): 101–126, Kadam (1998), Wagle (1998), and Waters (1998).

- ³¹ The description of his home is significant, "The enclosed copy of printed notices were [sic] then pasted on the walls of the corners of streets, where the Brahmins reside. From its commencement up to the present time, thirty-five pregnant widows came to this house. . ." (O'Hanlon, 84)

- ³² Such a perspective stands in contrast to contemporary accounts of dalitbahujan women's relative freedom that Kancha Ilaiah, for instance, has put forth. It functions as an important corrective to caste critiques that do not engage with the ambiguity of gendered subjectification. In addition, as Mary John suggests in her book review included in this volume, the forms of economic deprivation (often destitution) that characterizes such dalit-bahujan communities ought to also give pause to those who romanticize the visibility of dalitbahujan women in the public sphere.
- ³³ See also Guha (1987):135–165. Chandra's attempts to end her pregnancy involves her mother and her sister in an attempt to find the appropriate "medicine" for her once her brother-in-law has absolved himself of any responsibility for her "condition." The options available to Chandra the pregnant widow—to join a community of ascetics who are themselves abused by male religious leaders, or to suffer excommunication and bring dishonor upon her family, or finally, in her death, to appear before the colonial state as a criminal—echo the colonial contradictions of sex/gender. In Chandra's death these logics are fused: her excommunication from the caste community as a form of civic death only ironically extends the logic of the Hindu widow as someone who is already dead to the world. And the colonial state, in claiming to protect women from the horror of customary practices, enacts a horror of its own by criminalizing the very women who protect Chandra.
- ³⁴ Both the issue of widowhood and that of devadasi reform (debated in great detail in the Madras Presidency), reflected upper caste male anxieties about women whose status—as deviant devadasi or widow—highlighted the perverse and impossible conditions of good wifehood. Upper-caste widows were living examples of the caste restrictions on remarriage, since they were obliged to preserve their sexual purity as a condition of their caste status. Similarly, devadasis were lower-caste women for whom the ideology of marriage worked, ironically, only to render them sexually available to all men. This too was a consequence of their (low) caste status. It is no surprise, I think, that reformers like Phule and Periyar, and women affiliated with their anti-caste movements produced powerful critiques of caste practices through a critique of the marriage form, though the focus on marriage also served to displace the thornier issue of sexuality.
- ³⁵ Reformers recognized caste practice as the reason behind enforced widowhood, as replies to the colonial government noted in the collected papers entitled *Papers Relating to Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood*. Simultaneously, however, male reformers fixated on women's innate sexual vulnerability, their susceptibility to sexual advances, as one of the reasons why widows gave in to immoral behavior. The only rational response to such innate depravity was to allow the widow to remarry! See also the important arguments about the virtual nature of gendered agency in Spivak (1988): 271–313. See Uma Chakravarty's splendid reading of widows' accounts of domestic drudgery, Chapter Five, Chakravarty (1998).

Addressing the Hindu context within which debates about gender reform took place, Tanika Sarkar's work consistently questions gender historians' reliance on colonial texts with their assumptions about conjugality, gendered agency, and the "domestic." Instead, she has powerfully illustrated the Hindu logics of bhakti, surrender, and spirituality that were equally influential in the formation of gendered subjectivity. Sarkar's work traces the divergence between the demands of the Hindu domestic sphere and colonial modernity, as well as the points when they overlapped (e.g., in facilitating the emergence of a revivalist form of Hindu nationalism). This has also allowed her to critique the focus of Subaltern historians on colonial discourse without adequate attention to the patriarchal underpinnings of "community" that some of them (Chakrabarty, Chatterjee) have privileged instead. Her recent work has explored how the spiritual axis of Hindu marriage was offered up in place of colonial descriptions of the barbarity of Hindu marriage. This can be extended further, to mark the repeated inability to bring desire within the discourse of the domestic sphere. Sarkar (1999), Sarkar (2002). Dipesh Chakrabarty has also argued that the intimacy of family ties rendered the withdrawal of both affection and financial entitlement an unbearable form of suffering for the widow. He argues that the narrative of widows' suffering mobilized by "compassionate" male reformers was integral to the emergence of an upper-caste bourgeois sensibility. For male reformers, he points out, identifying with the widow's position helped fashion themselves as subjects of reason and sentiment both. Like Sarkar, Chakrabarty also argues that a discourse of spirituality allowed male reformers to disavow the issue of their own physical desire. But he does not pursue the significant implications of his argument for gender relations, folding his analysis instead into an argument about the peculiar forms of Indian modernity. See Chapter Five, Chakrabarty (2000).

³⁶ See Indira (1989) for a sensitive account of widowhood.

³⁷ Chatterjee (1990): 233–253.

³⁸ Zelliott (1988): 183–187. See Prashad (2000) for an excellent argument about the changing forms of nationalist involvement in the "uplift" of Bhangis, and for an analysis of the extent to which the Bhangi became symptomatic of Gandhi's understanding of the "evils" of untouchability. Gandhi's feminization of civil society and his attempts to engage in caste reform are related, reflected most clearly in his claims that the Bhangi was like a mother who cared for her children, performing even the most defiling labour uncomplainingly. Periyar's break with Gandhi concerned the lackadaisical attitudes of caste Hindus to the stated Congress goals of ending segregation in schools. See Barnett (1976), Dirks (2001), Geetha and Rajadurai (1998), Irschick (1969), Suntharalingam (1974).

³⁹ See Prashad (1996): 551–559 for an excellent discussion about the ambivalent relationship between Hindu reformers and the "dalit question" in North India, Menon (1993), and my chapter on "The Emergence of a

Dalit Public." (*Violence, Citizenship, and the Constitution of Civic Disability*, unpublished ms.).

- ⁴⁰ See Sonalkar (1999): 24–29. This early piece criticized the historical amnesia regarding the Hindu Code Bill that characterized feminist discussions of reservations for women and the Uniform Civil Code debates during the 1990s.

Sonalkar argues that Ambedkar "saw the need for a reform of Hindu civil society—an essential characteristic of which is that it is divided on the basis of caste—side by side with a constitution that established a 'modern' and 'secular' political society. And he saw the emancipation of women as central to that reform." Examining the debates over the Hindu Code Bill might also provide a different way of reading the processes of rationalization and reform of public practices and institutions central to Hinduism that Chatterjee has discussed in his "Secularism and Tolerance."

- ⁴¹ Upendra Baxi has called Ambedkar the Aristotle of the dalits, and makes a strong argument for the radical potential of the Indian Constitution in constituting radically "new" communities of suffering only partially related to the Hindu episteme. The naming of the Scheduled Castes, for instance, constitutes the community that the Constitution recognizes as a historically discriminated collectivity. See also in Baxi (1992).

- ⁴² See, e.g., the chapter "The Reformation of Caste: Periyar, Ambedkar, and Gandhi," in *Castes of Mind*.

- ⁴³ Dalit feminists have demanded that December 25—the date of Ambedkar's burning of the *Manusmriti* at Mahad—be commemorated as the true Indian Women's Liberation day, since Ambedkar had challenged the caste and gender exploitation legitimated by the *Manusmriti*.

- ⁴⁴ See Anandhi (1998) for an account of the relationship between nationalists and neo-Malthusians. Connected to such movements for sexual freedom and autonomy were critiques of the devadasi system for constructing lower-caste women as servants and wives of god. The consistent attempts of the Self-Respect movement to engage with this form of sexual exploitation ought to be distinguished from caste-Hindu attempts to engage in devadasi reform. The latter favoured inter-caste liaisons based on the recognition of lower-caste women as sexually available. The SRM's critiques were connected to lower-caste women's labouring lives and integrated with an overarching critique of caste and gender relations, in contrast to arguments about female chastity by upper-caste women who were interested in devadasi reform. Anandhi (1991): 739–746. Also see V. Geetha's critique of this text in her essay included in this volume, where she argues that *Dasigal Mosavalai* blames the victim as well as victimizer. Kannabiran (1995), Nair (1994), and Srinivasan (1985) have written about debates about the status of devadasis and attempts to abolish the practice in Madras Presidency.

- ⁴⁵ Sangari (1995): 3287–3310, and Sangari (1995): 3381–3389 is a powerful and carefully historicized account of how we might reconstruct the multiple

mediations of such structures. Also Upendra Baxi's critique of this position in a recent comment he wrote for the conference "Siting Secularism," Oberlin College, Oberlin, USA, April 19–21, 2002. Baxi argues that the multiplicity of laws regulating patriarchies might reflect a colonial investment in the proliferation of locality as the grounds for strategic governance, rather than the material for a critique of unilinear models of gender formation. Uma Chakravarti's work has been critical in illuminating the animating ideologies of brahminical patriarchy, but see also Pratima Pardeshi and Rekha Thakur's articles in *dalit* mentioned earlier.

⁴⁶ See Coward (1983) for an account of the genealogies of anthropological thinking concerning gender and kinship. See also John (1996), and Visweswaran (1997): 591–621 for engagements with feminist anthropology in the U.S.

⁴⁷ Bourdieu (1990).

⁴⁸ *Dalit sahitya* made a spectacular entry on the Marathi literary scene in the 1970s, linking the representative powers of language in invoking new realities, and new forms of violent birthing, with an ethics of disgust and revulsion for those who had perpetuated caste oppression. Aniket Jaaware has in fact argued that *dalit sahitya* inaugurates literary modernism in Marathi. Jaaware (2001).

Dalit sahitya indicted caste society and did so through the violent defacement of language, representing the familiar realities of life and labour at the stigmatized margins of urban existence. The city (Bombay)'s production of masculinized cultures of violence, and its identification with a *dalit* politics of militant street action and the visibility of powerful male bodies indexes one trajectory for a literature of protest characterized as an "architecture of anger." Early English accounts of Marathi *dalit sahitya* can be found in the *Times of India* supplement, "Dalit Literature: Voices of the Oppressed," put together by Dileep Padgaonkar, *Vagartha* Number 12, 1977 edited by Meenakshi Mukherjee, and the special issue of *Journal of South Asian Literature* edited by Philip Enblom and Eleanor Zelliot, Vol. XVII, No. 1, Winter–Spring 1982. See also *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Literature*. Ed. Arjun Dangle. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992. For a recent account of *dalit sahitya* that also engages with recent writing in other Indian languages, see Zelliot, Eleanor, "Dalit Literature, Language and Identity," in *Language in South Asia*. Ed. Braj Kachru and S.N. Sridhar. Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming.

⁴⁹ See e.g., Zelliot (1996).

⁵⁰ A recent photographic exhibit, *Visible Women, Invisible Work*, of photographs taken during Sainath's research for *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, is a testament to rural women's unrequited labour. Beginning with an exhibit during the AIDWA national conference in Visakhapatnam from November 23–27, 2001, the photographic exhibit had traveled through twenty-five venues in Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra,

Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu as of April 2002, and it has been seen by over 100,000 people. The exhibit was put up in the centre of villages, college canteens at women's colleges, and informal public spaces, and they were seen in those villages of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu where the photographs had been taken. To date, the exhibit has elicited 14 registers of comments in eight languages.

- 51 Ironically, dalit women's physical intimacy with this most abhorred and defiling of acts, excretion, gives them a kind of secret knowledge of the domestic economies from which they are excluded. If the brahmin's access to the secret knowledge from which others were to be excluded formed the psychobiography of his caste mark, the gendered reversal that is performed by the dalit woman's access to the intimate gastrointestinal economies of the household is then a poignant reminder of the knowledge—of what the upper-castes eat, of how their shit smells, and so forth—that defiled labour produces.
- 52 See also Agarwal (1994). Sen (1990) mentions Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini's attempts at women's ownership of land. A major attempt for women's ownership of landed property was undertaken by the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi in southern Maharashtra, led by Sharad Joshi, formulated as the "Lakshmi Mukthi" programme.
- 53 Of course there is a long tradition of caste-class analyses which was the primary rubric under which caste stigma had been (re)read as a form of deprivation.
- 54 While the metaphors of economy—surplus, capacity—point to the material circuits of expropriations, they are clearly also symbolic forms, means of abstraction that translate bodies into abstract conception of worth and value. Scholars have attempted to yoke the psychosocial effects of sexuality—mobilizing a language of desire and excess—together with the materiality of gendered exploitation, i.e., the performance of sexual labour. See e.g., Rubin (1975): 157–210 and Spivak (1988): 197–221 and 241–268.
- 55 Saidiya Hartman's account of the sexed subjectivity of the slave woman in the Antebellum South undertakes a similar exercise, and points to the critical junctures between violence, personhood, and property in slave societies. Hartman (1997).
- 56 Jaaware, Aniket, "Touch: A Study," unpublished ms.
- 57 The sociological study of disputes is an important site for the playing-out of dramas involving sexual transgression, desire, and caste norms. Hayden's (1999) recent book contains many instances of sexual indiscretion and a "nomadic" community's attempts to deal with them. M. N. Srinivas's work on disputes (many of them concerning sexual impropriety) can be found in Srinivas (1987). See also the story of a dalit, Satnami woman's life mentioned in Dube, Saurabh. *Untouchable Pasts*, esp. Chapter Four, "Satnamis In Village Life, 1900–1950," pp. 101–13. Legal cases are a rich source of transgressive behavior, and they have been an important source

for understanding caste hegemony by examining the acts and events that challenge it. Such cases are illustrative of the structured violence of everyday gender relations, and can be read against the grain from most early analyses by legal anthropologists, which focused on cultures of conflict resolution and law-like forms of authority among non-western 'Others.'

⁵⁸ Butler (1997).

⁵⁹ Lefort (1988): 17.

1 Dalit Women, Difference & Dalit Women's Movements

We Made History, Too

Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement

MEENAKSHI MOON and URMILA PAWAR

Editorial Notes by BARBARA R. JOSHI

Editor's Note

Beginning in the early 1900s, individuals in a number of India's hereditary Untouchable castes began to challenge the humiliation and exploitation of the traditional caste system and the religiously legitimized practice of untouchability. Their struggle, now known as the Dalit ("Oppressed") movement, is far from over, but it has already had a profound impact on the reshaping of Indian society and polity. Recently two Dalit women, Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar, set out to record the role of women in the early days of this momentous change. Their research took them into the homes of a cross-section of Dalit women from the state of Maharashtra, where the late untouchable leader Dr. Ambedkar developed one of the most influential movements of resistance and reform. Their study, written in Marathi, was published in Pune in 1989 under the title *We Made History Too*. In many ways the authors themselves are continuing to make history. Both are self-taught historians and writers who have encouraged other Dalit women to write and to take an active role in the continuing struggles against oppression of Untouchables and of women. We must hope that news of their work will encourage Dalit women in other regions of India to research and record the rapidly fading history of women in the early days of other distinctive Untouchable movements. The following synopsis was prepared by Mrs.

Moon and Mrs. Pawar to describe their findings and their experiences during their research.

* * *

The story of women's participation in the Untouchable Movement is an interesting one. To trace the early activism of Untouchable women one has to go back to the beginning of the 20th century. In the following decades women's activities developed from mere participation as beneficiaries or as audience, to the shouldering of significant responsibility in various fields of activity in the Ambedkar movement.¹

In the first decade of the 20th century we find Shivram Janaba Kamble taking up the mission of removing the stigma of prostitution from the face of the Untouchables. In 1908, through his magazine *Somvanshi Mitra* he wrote articles asking his community to accept in marriage the hands of women who had been thrown into the degrading profession of prostitution through the practice of giving girls to Hindu temples as *devadasis* (slaves of the God).²

Besides writing articles Mr. Kamble conducted various meetings to awaken and enlighten people and appealed to them to abandon the practice of offering girls to the god and goddess of Jejuri known as Khandoba and Yellamma.

Mr. Kamble's efforts yielded positive results. One *devadasi* named Shivubai responded to the call and wrote a very long letter explaining the miserable life of the wretched women and offering herself in marriage to any willing person. In response to her call, published by Kamble in his magazine, one of his associates, Ganpatrao Hunmantrao Gaikwad, agreed to marry Shivubai. Accordingly the marriage was solemnized and was given wide publicity. Not only did Mr. Kamble encourage such marriages but he also saw to it that these women got respect and dignity in society. His propaganda against the *devadasi* system was so effective that in the year 1909 not a single girl was offered to Khandoba as a *devadasi*. It was also found that other slave girls of the God (prostitutes) were accepted by the young boys of the Untouchable community as their wives.

The early movement of Untouchables in Maharashtra also led to increasing participation by women in conferences. A Nagpur

woman, a nurse, described her experiences of untouchability to the all-India women's conference of 1920. Other women were brought before audiences either to welcome the guest speakers in the conferences or to sing the welcome songs in the meetings.

The movement begun by Dr. Ambedkar generated even more enthusiastic participation. Dr. Ambedkar organized several conferences of the Untouchables. He saw to it that women's conferences were held simultaneously with those for men. By 1930 women had become so conscious that they started conducting their own meetings and conferences independently.

In Mahad in 1927, during the historic *satyagraha* movement to claim the right of Untouchables to take water from the public tank, Dalit women not only participated in the procession with Dr. Ambedkar but also participated in the deliberations of the subject committee meetings in passing resolutions about the claim for equal human rights.³

In the Nasik *satyagraha*, started by Ambedkar in 1930 for the right of Untouchables to enter Hindu temples, several hundred women conducted sit-in agitations in front of the temple and courted arrest. Every batch of volunteers consisted of some women. Some of the women still alive have been interviewed during this research. This *satyagraha* was carried on until 1935, when on the 13th of October Dr. Ambedkar declared at Yeola (near Nasik) that he had been born a Hindu but would not die a Hindu. In the Yeola conference Dr. Ambedkar announced this *satyagraha* was terminated, as the heart of the Hindus was not likely to change. He also said that his objective was to organize and to awaken the Untouchables themselves.

During this period, women conducted meetings to support separate electorates for the Untouchables, and passed resolutions accordingly.⁴ In May 1936 the women held an independent conference along with one for men in Bombay to support Dr. Ambedkar's declaration of intent to convert to a non-Hindu religion. The speeches of women, reported exhaustively in *Janata Weekly*, show that women were very frank in stating that they wanted a religion that would recognize their freedom, dignity, and equal status with men. They expressed confidence that Dr.

Ambedkar would not drag them into a religion where women would have to wear the *burkha* or live in *purdah*.⁵

The resolutions passed by women in various conferences demanded:

- (1) Free and compulsory education for girls,
- (2) Women's representation in state legislative assemblies, local bodies, etc.,
- (3) Training for self-protection of Untouchable women, such as wielding of sticks or karate,
- (4) Starting a women's wing in the Samta Sainik Dal (Equality Volunteer Corps),
- (5) Prohibiting child marriages. In some places women made efforts, with the help of Ambedkarite leaders, to rescue women kidnapped by Muslim hooligans. Efforts also were made to rescue women from prostitution areas. This was done in Nagpur in 1936.

Efforts were made by all Ambedkarite workers to encourage women's education. The research revealed that the first girl's schools in the Untouchable community was started by Kalicharan Nandagavali, who later became the first Untouchable representative from Gondia to the Central Provinces Legislative Council during the 1920s. Similar schools were started in the Konkan region and at a few other places. In 1924 in Nagpur the first woman to start a girl's school was Jaibai Chaudhari, who herself secured an education against heavy odds and against the wishes of her husband. She was encouraged and helped in her work by a Christian nun. Other women social workers started independent hostels exclusively for girls during the 1930s.

The political movement begun by Dr. Ambedkar brought forth the political ambition of Untouchable women. The women conducted conferences and passed resolutions to support the Independent Labour Party and later the Scheduled Castes Federation programs.⁶ In describing the 1942 conference of women at Nagpur, held at the same time as the meeting of the Scheduled Castes Federation, Dr. Ambedkar said, "The presence of women in the conference in their thousands was a sight for the gods to witness. Their dress, their cleanliness and the confidence with which they

behaved in the conference brought delight to my heart." Similar conferences of women of great magnitude were organized at Kanpur (1944), Bombay (1945), and Calcutta (1946).

In all these conferences women leaders, *viz.* Minambal Shivraj from Madras, Sulochana Dongre of Amravati, Shantabai Dani and several other women addressed the meetings. Radhabai Kamble, a worker in a cotton mill, had come up as a labor leader in the Ambedkarite movement in the 1920s. She gave evidence before the Royal Commission of Labour in 1929. The Untouchable women also joined the political agitations and courted arrest and underwent jail during the Scheduled Caste Federation's 1946 *satyagraha* in the State Assemblies. From all this it will be clear that women had made great strides in achieving political consciousness.

The research shows that women also were interested in reforming the marriage system. Untouchable society already permitted divorce, remarriage and widow marriage, but the women in the movement brought several further reforms in the marriage system. They opposed child marriage, and actively encouraged remarriage and widow marriage. They tried to eliminate unnecessary rituals in the marriage ceremony, and tried to reduce expenses in the marriage. They even adopted marriages through advertisement, which was not acceptable then even among higher classes. Even marriages among different Untouchable sub-castes were welcomed. Such reforms were often ahead of the higher castes.⁷

The research has also documented the change that has occurred among women since the great conversion to Buddhism in 1956. Normally it is believed that women are mostly conservative in cultural matters and not amenable to change, but Dalit women accepted the progressive religion of Buddha voluntarily and adopted the new religion. They have given up old customs, rites and rituals, visits to Hindu pilgrimage sites, fasting on various Hindu festivals, etc. The women have also adopted the Buddhist form of worship and way of life which is based on morality, wisdom and compassion. The conversion has changed their outlook about caste so much that the new generation of Buddhists hardly knows its sub-caste, and many inter-caste marriages have been welcomed in the Buddhist faith. Formerly girls were given contemptuous

names which indicated their low position and caste. Now the Buddhist women name their daughters after great women from Buddhist history.

* * *

A Note on Our Research Process. The research on this project included locating and reviewing various newspapers published within the Untouchable community during the last hundred years. These include *Dhnyanprakash*, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, *Janata*, *Somvanshi Mitra*, etc. In addition to these, some scholarly publications by eminent writers, census and other relevant reports, rare booklets, leaflets and similar material have been explored.⁸

The major portion of the research involved interviews of approximately sixty women who were connected with the Ambedkarite movement. Some information has been obtained from the relatives of deceased participants in the movement. This information was collected from various places in Maharashtra and also from Delhi. The research as a whole throws a flood of light on various activities of women which were hitherto unknown. As far as we know nobody has so far dealt with this subject. We interviewed women participants in the Ambedkar movement in order to understand what role they played in the movement; what sort of experiences they had in the field as well as in the family as mother, wife, and daughter; what was the effect on their life of Ambedkar's movement and speeches; what difference was there between a common housewife and a Dalit woman social worker; how far these women are aware of continuing atrocities on women and similar issues.

We travelled throughout Maharashtra and contacted women workers in Bombay, Pune, Satara, Nagpur, Nasik and sometimes in the countryside. We also visited Delhi. Sometimes we could give advance notice, but most of the time we had to take them by surprise. Several times we had to remain without food and water, but when we reached somebody's house we were showered with warm hospitality and love.

At some places we were told that such and such woman was an active worker, but on verification or in a personal meeting the woman would be frank in saying that she was not the woman we

wanted. Another thing we noticed was their utter sincerity and honesty in speaking about their own life, and their willingness to help us learn about other women. Thus by lighting one candle from another, the picture of the Ambedkarite movement became clearer and clearer.

Most of the women we met are illiterate, but some are teachers, some are writers, and three or four are Buddhist nuns. A couple of the women are legislators, and some are in local bodies. Most of these women are poor, but some have attained financial security. Most of the women active in the movement were born in social workers' families, or were given in marriage into such families. Some lived in neighborhoods where social activities were going on and became involved.

For all of them Dr. Ambedkar's words and movement had an inspiring effect on their minds. Even the participants in the movement who were illiterate subscribed to Ambedkar's journals, e.g. *Mooknayak*, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, *Janata*, *Prabuddha Bharat* to keep these publications alive. It was heartening to see that women contributed even from their own meager income for almost every activity that was going on in the movement. They paid four *annas* or eight *annas* when their daily wages were hardly a *rupee*. [There are sixteen *annas* in a *rupee*.] These contributions were very significant in the movement.

While joining the processions, *satyagrahas*, etc. these women had to entrust their children and family responsibilities to a neighbor or to a close relative like mother or daughter. Occasionally some of them had cooperation from their husbands, but some of them had to face brutal beatings at their husband's hand. Some women courted arrest along with men in *satyagrahas*. At such times, some of them took their infant babies with them to jail, and some carried all their belongings including chickens. Those who left their nursing babies at home complained of breast pains in jail. In order to facilitate social work a few women underwent family planning operations, while a few brought home a second wife for the husband.

We have noticed that these women who were once meek and shy are now self-reliant and dare-devil. Taking into consideration the extremely backward social atmosphere, the achievements of

these women were most commendable. Schools and hostels and orphanages for girls were started by women like Jaibai Chaudhari and Deshbhratar in the Nagpur area. Radhabai Kamble shouldered leadership in the labor movement. Sakhubai Mohite and Suman Bandisode were among several women who led organizations and participated in such movements as the struggle to rename Marathwada University, extend [affirmative action] reservations to Buddhists, and provide land to landless laborers.

The women also continue to be interested in political work. The Republican Party, founded by Ambedkar in 1958, was split into several groups after his death. The women we met are working through these groups but are not happy with these divisions. They expect that the whole Dalit leadership should unite and work as a whole and take the chariot of Ambedkar's work ahead.

Notes

- ¹ As noted above, there were several different regional Untouchable movements that developed during this period. Ambedkar's movement in Maharashtra, centered in the large Mahar caste, was by far the most influential, and is the subject of *We Made History Too*. However there were also significant developments in Bengal, Madras, coastal and central Andhra, and the Punjab. Often movements within different Untouchable caste communities in the same region evolved in distinctive ways. We are only beginning to chart the similarities, differences, and communication among these struggles to generate change from below.
- ² The *devadasi* system of religiously legitimized prostitution was sanctioned by the Brahman priesthood but drew women from the "lower" castes. The system continues today in some regions of central and southern India and is a bitter focus of Dalit resistance to "high" caste exploitation.
- ³ The Mahad *satyagraha* became an especially potent symbol of the struggle for Untouchable rights because of the importance of equal access to drinking water in India's heat and frequent droughts. Untouchable women have been especially burdened by long treks to water sources that often remain segregated and unequal.
- ⁴ Bitter experience with the attitudes of "higher" caste Hindus made most Untouchables fearful of unfettered majority rule in an independent India. The demand for separate electorates and proportional representation in legislatures became part of the response to this fear.
- ⁵ The 1956 conversion of Dr. Ambedkar and hundreds of thousands of his supporters to their own independent vision of Buddhism caught most of India by surprise and led to the common assumption that the conversion was merely a political stunt. It is important to realize that the conversion

had been the subject of discussion within Ambedkar's own Mahar community for many years, and that women had been part of that discussion.

- ⁶ The Labour Party, the Federation, and the Republican Party represent successive efforts by Ambedkar to help Untouchables use democratic politics in their search for social and economic equality.
- ⁷ "Higher" castes commonly encouraged child marriage and forbade remarriage of widows. The dual tragedy built into this pattern became the primary focus of many "high" caste social reformers.
- ⁸ It would be hard to overstate the importance or the difficulty of locating and preserving these scattered primary materials on social change at the bottom of Indian society. The Moon family has been active in this work for several years and has established a small but valuable library in Nagpur. Vasant Moon serves as chief editor for the Government of Maharashtra project that is publishing the complete works of the late Dr. Ambedkar.

Dalit Movements and Women's Movements

GABRIELE DIETRICH

The following is an attempt to draw on some experiences of women's movements in Tamil Nadu and to raise analytical questions which may help to draw conclusions from such experiences. The focus of this attempt is the interface between patriarchy, the caste system and untouchability. More specifically, incidents of violence against women will be analysed and the perception of this violence by caste leaders and by women in the women's movement. This will lead to certain conceptual questions which have a bearing on our strategies. Feminist and Dalit conceptualisations will be looked into. The practical questions which are involved are the relationship between women's movements and Dalit movements, and how cases of violence against Dalit women should be taken up.

I see a tendency in women's movements to play down the caste factor and to emphasise the unity among women as victims of violence. While a certain basic understanding has been developed that control over women and control over lower castes are connected, the question of untouchability has not been thoroughly confronted. There has also been an underlying assumption that, if patriarchy is tackled, caste will be weakened automatically. This has often led to a preoccupation with an argument against Brahminism and to a certain romanticisation of low caste and tribal culture, while at the same time the actual situation of Dalit women is not confronted. At the same time, Dalit movements, while aware of women's oppression in general, tend to emphasise that Dalit women suffer a violence which is in a category of its own and needs therefore to be taken up as a caste issue.

Both positions are valid and based on experience. It is true that violence against women cuts across caste and class, especially in an urban context. However, the circumstances differ. Cases of dowry connected with torture and murder are more frequent among upper castes and it is probably not exaggerated to say that family violence among upper castes tends to be quite systematic. This type of systematised family violence occurs much less among backward castes and Dalits unless they have become economically prosperous and try to imitate upper caste values, which is very rare. Dalit women are not under the ideology of husband-worship and if they face violence within the family, they may fight back.

However, they face the collective threat of physical harm from upper caste forces all the time. Against such violence, the men of the Dalit community can often not "protect their women" and it is therefore perceived as a collective weakness and vulnerability. At the same time, such violence is often taken as "normal" and rape cases tend to be compromised or cheaply compensated in an overall bargain to settle the caste issue. Women have hardly any say in such matters. If one asks why such women do not turn to the women's movement, the answer is probably that women's movements in most cases are not a permanently felt presence in rural areas, where physical assault on women is a "normal" occurrence. Even if the women's movement is present, it may not be seen as trustworthy since it is seen as not taking caste issues seriously. At the same time, Dalit leaders may have their own patriarchal interests in using or suppressing an assault on a woman. The net result of this situation is often that Dalit women may end up doubly deserted, without support from their own kith and kin and also not reached by support from the women's movement.

To explain the situation, I would like to give some concrete examples. I am aware that all the cases which I am dealing with are much too complex to be adequately dealt with in a brief essay. I am, therefore, confining myself mainly to those features which throw light on the relationship between caste and patriarchy.

Case studies

1. *The Bodi riots*

In September-October 1989 the areas of Bodinayakanur,

Thevaram, Theni, Allinagaram and Usilampatti, south-west of Madurai towards the Kerala border, were rocked by caste violence, mainly between Thevars and Pallars, which led to a massive loss of life and property. The Bodi riots have been widely reported in the daily newspapers.¹ However the press has been under pressure since Bodi is the constituency of Jayalalitha, the Tamil Nadu A-DMK leader who was heading the opposition. This led to hectic activities of both DMK and A-DMK in the area. The conflict turned into a campaign against the Pallar leader John Pandian who was accused of inciting communal violence and was arrested and jailed for over one month.

There are two incidents which triggered off the Bodi riots. The crucial incident was the murder of a Dalit woman, Muthupillai, aged around 50 who had gone to collect firewood on 9 September. There are different versions about the murder. Some say she was murdered by a Pillaimar who was identified but declared insane by the police and let go. Others say that a group of three or four Thevars raped and murdered the woman of whom one was identified and confessed in public.

However, no arrests were made. Not only that, the Bodi rural police station refused to take the complaint of Muthupillai's relatives and the same happened to them in three other police stations. This led to delay in the disposal of the body. The Dalits threatened to picket buses and only then the DSP of Theni agreed to register a case. However, since the official version was that the murderer had been insane, no further action was taken. The Dalits were infuriated by police inaction.

Another incident which created tension was the visit of the Handloom Minister, Thangavelu (DMK), to Meenakshipuram for a loan distribution scheme on 8 September, the day preceding the murder. Since he belongs to their caste, the Dalits of the area wanted to give him a big reception as this was his first visit after becoming Minister. However, Panchayat President Raju Pillai (A-DMK) refused them the public road and the use of *mela* (drums) for the purpose. Besides, the Dalits had many grudges against the panchayat president already since they felt he had withheld basic amenities from them.

On 10 September John Pandian, leader of the Thevendrakula

Vellala Sangam, an organisation of the Pallars, was called to mediate. He came out with a blistering attack on the non-Dalits. In his attack the offence against the minister and the murder of the woman got connected. He especially attacked Panchayat President Raju Pillai and incited the Dalits to ask for his daughter in marriage. If he would not give her, she should be taken and carried off. This created an uproar among the Pillaimars and Thevars and was taken as a blatant call to communal violence.

From 12 September onwards, notices against John Pandian's speech appeared, demanding the arrest of John Pandian. Tensions ran high and on 15 September Pon Muthuramalinga, DMK minister and a Thevar by caste, came to mediate. The Dalits rendered an official apology but the demand for John Pandian's arrest persisted. Communal riots broke out on the night of 16 September and carried on for a week, leaving 30 people dead, many more injured, and lakhs of property damaged. John Pandian was arrested on 16 September and stayed in jail till October 26th.

What is highly disturbing about these events is that the murder and mutilation of Muthupillai could neither be properly investigated nor prosecuted. It has not been taken seriously as a murder case, nor has it been seen as an incitement to communal violence in any way. However, the speeches of John Pandian have been identified as a clear case of incitement to communal violence. Some of the Dalits have been trying to take the line that John Pandian was only advocating inter-caste marriage. It is interesting to see how S. Ganeshram in *Economic and Political Weekly* has analysed John Pandian's speech, emphasising in this article his violent ways and criminal record during his political life:

He called upon Harijans to seek brides from non-Harijans and if this was not conceded, to abduct the girls by force and marry them. Thus, he hoped to get social equality for Harijans, which created tension among the non-Harijans. But he failed to realise the fact that social equality cannot be achieved in this caste-ridden society by marrying a non-Harijan girl. In fact inter-caste marriages themselves have served to kindle communal tensions.²

The logic of this argument seems to be that aspiration to equality is seen as an incitement of communal violence. This view is

held even by a reporter who tries to give an impartial picture. The problem here is that the verbal assault of John Pandian (who is certainly patriarchal and violent in his expression) has been taken to be a more grievous injury than the actual murder and mutilation of the Dalit woman Muthupillai. At the same time, when the posters attacking John Pandian also used abusive language against Dalit women, no offence or incitement to communal violence was recognised in this.

It is disturbing that in the case of the Bodi riots no women's movement was in a position to come forward, take up the case of Muthupillai and at the same time record the effects of the communal clash on women. We also have to reflect on the fact that control over the women of a community is an integral part of establishing superiority—so much so that the Dalit community is forced into rape fantasies. At the same time, the expression of these rape fantasies is prosecuted with much more vigour than the actual rapes and murders inflicted on Dalits. The reason for this is obviously the fact that even the fantasy is perceived as posing a lethal threat to the perpetuation of the caste system, while the actually ongoing rapes and murders are perpetuating it. It seems to be extremely difficult to extricate women from this patriarchal caste dominance and to help them to develop a non-violent resistance against it which would reach out across caste lines.

2. The Allalaperi issue

Allalaperi³ is a separate unit (*uratchi*) of Kariapatti Panchayat in Kamaraj District of Central Tamil Nadu. It was inhabited by 33 Dalit families and about 100 Theval families (Agamudayar) which belong to the Mukkulathur community. The Thevars own between 5–15 acres of land while the Dalits who are Parayars have half an acre to 2 acres. The Parayars work also as agricultural coolies and make baskets from the leaves of the palmyra tree. Among the Parayars, one leader, Guruswami, owned a bit of land and refused to employ coolie labour. He was arguing for self-respect and dignity among the Dalits. His daughter Panchavaran (12 years) was raped on 1 September 1989 by one Sivan (19 years) of the Agamudayar community, while she grazed goats. Against the custom, Gurusamy

filed a police complaint at the Kariapatti police station. However, since no medical report had been taken, the complaint was only of molestation and attempted rape.

The village panchayat held a meeting, reproaching Guruswami for going to the police. They also imposed restriction on the Dalits such as not to wear chappals, not to ride a bicycle etc. The Dalits, therefore, refused the carrying of dead bodies of animals and humans and also the announcing of death by drumming. The protracted conflict was aggravated on 21 May 1990 when a small girl of the Thevar community died and one Alagu of the Dalits refused to announce the death since it was midnight. He was slapped, and he complained to the police who took no action.

Again, a panchayat meeting was held which refused the Dalits the use of the common pump. They were also refused articles from shops and were told not to use the straight road to their locality but to go around. On 19 June 1990 one Mahalingam was attacked while he used the road. The police took no action on the complaint.

On 7 July 1990, the Ambedkar Centenary was celebrated in Kariapatti with Gurusamy as the main speaker. He told how the Thevars were trying to make him withdraw the police complaint against the rape of his daughter. He said: "If our daughters are raped and we report, we will be offered 100 rupees and be expected to accept that. But will high caste people accept if we offer Rs. 100? If a high caste girl is raped, will the police remain inactive in this way? Now, who will marry my daughter? Why doesn't the boy come forward and marry her? Then we will have interdining (*samapandi*).” That night, stones were thrown on Dalit homes.

Actually Gurusamy only appealed to the popular ethics that a rapist should marry the girl and thus legalise the 'relationship'. Besides, he was talking of an Anuloma alliance, the boy being of a higher caste. Nevertheless, the Thevars were outraged.

On the 3 August, the Dalits went to a festival at the Kaliammal temple for which they had to cross the Thevar street. Due to this, there was an attack on the Dalit families. Gurusamy and many others escaped but three Dalits who were trying to catch the bus to file a police complaint were caught and beaten all night. Thevar women, in solidarity with their caste, lay on the road to stop the

bus in which they were trying to go. One of the three captives was Gurusamy's son, Muthumari. On the same night, 4 Thevars got hold of Gurusamy's newly married daughter-in-law, Bakkiam, locked her up and gang-raped her, leaving her only the next morning. Another woman, Mallika, was also raped when she went to her house to fetch a few things.

Leaders of the IDLM (Integrated Dalit Liberation Movement) printed and pasted posters against police inaction very soon after the incident. They were arrested under Section 295 (incitement of communal riots). Another factor in their arrest had been the organising and preparation of a function on 15 August (Independence Day) to distribute chappals to Dalits in the presence of the District Collector. This could not take place.

By 10 August the Dalit Movement decided to appeal to Pennurimai Iyakkam, an autonomous women's movement among slum dwellers in Madurai, to take up the case. Pennurimai Iyakkam was the first outside force which was able to enter the area and investigate the case and talk to the S.P. and other authorities. The fact that the composition of Pennurimai Iyakkam is across caste lines and the team itself had Dalits and Thevars as well as others was crucial at this moment. Other forces involved were SCALM, Puratchi Kavinyar Peravai, Students Islamic Union, and the Indian People's Front. Pennurimai Iyakkam made it clear that it was only prepared to take the issue if guarantee was given that the rape cases will not be withdrawn or compromised. This was agreed.

Under the tension, 26 Dalit families migrated to Karuvelampatti in Madurai district, even though they had to leave their land behind. Peace talks were held. On 27 August negotiations were held between the authorities and the people supported by different movements. On 28 August the 26 families returned to Kariapatti in Kamaraj district and are now resettled there with Government assistance. Apart from getting house pattas and assistance for house construction, Rs. 500 for the injured was also paid. They have lost their land in Allalaperi but got a livelihood from basket making.

This settlement is unique in the history of caste conflicts in the area. As far as the rape case is concerned, Gurusamy and his

wife supported the raped daughter-in-law. This was due to the fact that people had started blaming Gurusamy for confronting the Thevars and making their life more difficult. Being affected by rape in his own family was seen as an atonement for the hardships he had brought upon others. However, his son, who was newly married and had been beaten up, could not face the rape of his wife. To him a version was upheld that the rape was only attempted.

This means that even though involvement of the women's movement was crucial in settling the case and preventing it from spreading into a riot, it did not imply that Dalit women themselves would be really strengthened. They remained under the patriarchal controls of their caste. It was also not possible to build women's unity across caste lines in the locality itself. At the same time, the slum dwellers in different areas in Madurai who were informed about the issue, wholeheartedly supported the intervention across caste lines, even though many of them are Thevars.

This indicates that in times of relative peace such unity can be built. Women even pointed out that caste interests are a male affair and only men wear caste names. However, in situations of confrontation, support to one's own community can become a priority. At the same time, Dalit leaders recognised that they were unable to resolve the case on a caste base and needed wider support. It was also an extraordinary success that this issue could be contained and did not spread into a wider riot. Only property was lost but not lives. Women's suffering got recorded and publicised fairly adequately. It was also understood that the existence and intervention of the women's movement was crucial in compelling the authorities to take action.

The above two cases dealt with the experiences of Dalit women who suffer rape and murder as part of an ongoing caste confrontation. As Justice Bhagwati pointed out in an address to the Maharashtra State Women's Council in 1986, "rape is increasingly becoming a form of caste war".⁴ It is, indeed, this aspect which we in the women's movement have to confront with great seriousness. At the same time, there is also a definite need for Dalit movements to develop a deeper understanding of patriarchy. The above two

cases have shown how the collective mechanism with which rape cases are taken remains entirely patriarchal and often enough enhances the danger of further rapes. This patriarchal frame of mind can be illustrated more clearly in two cases which were handled by the Rural Women's Liberation Movement in Arakkonam.

3. Experience near Arakkonam

Arakkonam⁵ in North Arcot District of Tamil Nadu is an area with a high percentage of Dalit landless labourers, most of them Parayars. In the recent past, Ambedkar Mantrams have spread rapidly and efforts are being made to rename North Arcot as Ambedkar District. The Rural Women's Liberation Movement (RWLM) has the majority of its members from the landless agricultural labourers who are Dalits. It has worked together with the Landless Labourers Movement which has tried to take up wage issues as well as issues of use of resources (land, water) across caste lines. While there have been ideological differences between the Dalit organisations, the Landless Labourers Movement (LLM), and the RWLM because of differences on the caste/class nexus, there has been cooperation on some local issues and on festive occasions like Ambedkar's birthday.

In the recent past, there have been two cases where the relationship between the women's movement and the Ambedkar Mantrams came under real strain. On 20 April 1990, a twenty-five year old woman named Kala, mother of three children, committed suicide by throwing herself in front of a train. The activists from the RWLM contacted the parents and went with them to the hospital to see the body. On investigation it turned out that the husband had an extra-marital affair and was ill treating his wife continuously. The parents were prepared to bear witness to these facts. However, since husband and wife were Parayars, representatives of the Ambedkar Movement were present at the hospital. The village president, who is an advocate and legal advisor of the Ambedkar Movement, pressurised the parents to make a statement that Kala was deaf and mentally disturbed and that nobody was responsible for her death.

The postmortem was inconclusive. The RWLM was trying to

file a case of abetment to suicide, but Kala's husband and his family managed to convince the panchayat president to hold a panchayat which absolved the husband of any responsibility. While the RWLM publicly denounced the husband and the panchayat president, the Ambedkar Movement supported the president and the husband and helped them to burn the body. The panchayat president tried with a group of Ambedkar Mantram members to appease the RWLM members and to move them to drop the issue. However, they gheraoed his office on 27 April. On 28 April the advocate organised some 200 Ambedkar Mantram youth for a procession. The RWLM managed to get together with Ambedkar Mantram members arguing with them that they had supported issues of atrocity against Dalits but if a Dalit woman is driven to death by her Dalit husband, no justice will be done. After this, a certain understanding was reached, but the case did not stand legally.

The other case was the rape of Kalpana, a three-year-old daughter of Sri Lankan repatriates by a Dalit neighbour on 7 July 1990. The act was discovered by the parents and soiled cloth with semen was secured but medical examination did not take place. The Ambedkar Mantram of Attupakkam conducted a Panchayat and decided on a fine of Rs. 250. They also accompanied the rapist to the RWLM office to prevent them from taking up the case. After a heated argument, they left the women activists to report the matter to the police. On 14 July a public meeting was organised to demand justice for Kalpana. A break-away group of the Ambedkar Mantram supported the issue.

While these strains persist, the Ambedkar Movement seeks help from the RWLM in cases of inter-caste violence. The Ambedkar Mantrams themselves are entirely male dominated. While women participate in mobilisation, they are not represented in any decision making bodies.

Underlying conceptualisations

To go into underlying conceptualisations is a very difficult task since these are unavoidably linked up with interests of movements on the one hand and with views on very ancient history on the other which are often difficult to establish. As such, the following explorations can only be very tentative.

In the women's movement

I would like to start with the perceptions which enabled the members of Pennurimai Iyakkam to interact with the Allalaperi issue. The overall outlook of the movement is very much expressed in the words of the poet Bharathiar:

Nobody is poor or a slave by birth [i.e. by "Nature"].
There is no degraded human being in India;
Joyfully we will have education and wealth,
All people will live together as equals . . .

These lines from the song "*Viduthalai*" are often sung by the women in the movement. However, in the concrete experience of daily life, caste and class exploitation and thus disadvantage "by birth" are very much a reality. There was an awareness that even in the struggles for housing and basic amenities which the movement promotes, Dalit women are more marginalised and subdued than others. At the same time there is a vivid awareness of goonda violence and threat of gang rape in many of the areas, both among Dalits and non-Dalits.

Therefore, when the IDLM approached Pennurimai Iyakkam, there was no hesitation to take up the issue. There was no reluctance also to take a clear stand with the plight of Dalit women from women of other castes. This had probably to do with the fact that through practical activities and handling of cases, the connection between systematised family violence in upper castes and collective violence against Dalit women had become quite visible. There is also no romanticism about relative sexual freedom among low castes here, since the other side of that coin is clearly enhanced sexual harassment from other men, be it at the work place (e.g. among construction workers) or in caste clashes. Besides, Thevar women are aware of female infanticide in their own caste.

While in the clash of Bodi, in the face of Dalit gang rape fantasies, exploited and whipped up to the maximum by Thevar men, women got subsumed under the caste structure and they also helped "their men" in the clash of Allalaperi. Thevar women and other middle castes have ample reasons for common cause with other women outside the situation of acute caste clash. There is a

strong intuitive perception that male authority is the bedrock of caste. This is often encountered when the movement runs negotiations in which "women panchayats" have to face caste panchayats. There is, therefore, also a feeling that women can overcome caste cleavages much more easily than patriarchal caste forces. Theories about the origin of caste are not much in the picture except that Brahmin values are held in contempt for obvious reasons. I would now like to explore some of the conceptualisations current in the women's movement in India on the relationship between patriarchy and caste.

To characterise the situation, it may be useful to start with the analysis of Joanna Liddle and Ram Joshi in their book *Daughters of Independence*⁶ which is subtitled "Gender, Caste and Class in India". The authors argue that there was a pre-Aryan "matriarchal" culture which was basically egalitarian and free from caste. The matrilineal culture of the Nayars in Kerala is taken to be a remnant of this stratum as well as matriliney and matrilocality in the north-eastern tribes. This culture is stated to have been destroyed by the Aryan invasions which are accountable for having established the caste system as well as control over women's sexuality. Later, Brahmin codifications, especially in the Smritis, are said to have tightened the controls.

The position is argued as follows: "At first there was no caste consciousness, no hereditary occupations and no rules about marriage within the class. The development of this form of social organisation into a caste structure was a slow process which only began when the Aryans, having established dominance over the native population around 15 B.C. began to class the indigenous people and those of mixed descent as outsiders, relegating them to a fourth category of Sudras (servants) and excluding them from Vedic religion."⁷

The real tight differentiation is then seen as having occurred in response to the power struggle between Brahmins and Kshatriyas, the reforms introduced by Jainism and Buddhism and the protests by Vaishyas and Shudras.⁸ The final decline was then seen to have occurred around 500 A.D. when child marriage, the ban on widow remarriage and Sati were practiced among the upper castes, especially Kshatriyas.⁹

There are various problems with this view of history:

1. It comes close to an inverted racial theory of Aryan invasions vs. Dravidian and proto-Dravidian cultures which has been questioned by modern historians like Romila Thapar,¹⁰ by anthropological research on caste, and by Dr. Ambedkar in his writings on caste. Ambedkar brands the invasion theory as a racist, colonial, Western invention, eagerly taken over and promoted by Brahmin scholars.¹¹
2. The position is argued only at the level of *varna*, and therefore the authors cannot go into the actual functioning of *jatis* and subcastes which is much more complicated. For example, the Nayars, who are seen to be matriarchal and egalitarian, practiced severe untouchability not only towards untouchables but also towards the Nadars whose women were forbidden to wear the upper cloth.¹²
3. The analysis also leaves out completely the panchavarnas or untouchables. It clubs untouchables and Adivasis with the Shudras and thus neglects the violence between the Shudras and the "lower" sections. It also tends to romanticise low caste culture as being free from sexual controls and does not enable us to get an understanding of patriarchy as it functions in low caste, outcaste and Adivasi culture, often in response to collective patriarchal violence from the upper castes.
4. While the basic thrust of the analysis is to establish linkages between caste and patriarchy, the argument remains stuck in a polemic against Brahmin ideology and especially sexual controls. It does not explore the communality of interest between women and Dalits into which I think we need to go. This will be taken up after discussing Dalit positions.

A second position which stands out is that of Ruth Manorama, an activist of Women's Voice, a slum based mass organisation in Bangalore with a high percentage of Dalit members. Ruth is also active in the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement. Due to her double commitment to the cause of women and of Dalits, she has been untiring in highlighting the cause of Dalit women who she describes as "the thrice alienated", by class, patriarchy and caste.¹³ While Ruth's analysis goes to a large extent along with the above summarised position of Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi in that she

sees Aryan invasion and racial theory as the cause of caste and caste specific forms of patriarchy, she goes beyond *varna* and has the concrete functioning of *jati* and sub-caste in mind.

Her real contribution is to make the triple plight of Dalit women visible who, under conditions of grinding poverty and severe exploitation at the work place also suffer caste specific ban on water access and gang rape from upper castes, while at the same time they may be beaten up in their own houses as well. Dalit poet Teresamma, a teacher from Guntur, puts the situation into the following words:

We go to work for we are poor
But the same silken beds mock us
While we are ravished in broad daylight.
Ill-starred our horoscopes are.
Even our tottering husbands
Lying on the cots in a corner
Hiss and shout for revenge
If we cannot stand their touch.¹⁴

This position is important since it confronts women in the women's movement as well as men in the Dalit movement with the real plight of Dalit women.

I would now like to go into a third position which, though it ultimately agrees with the invasion theory, also goes into discussing other possible origins of the caste system and works out with sharpness how subjugation of women is constitutive to the very existence of caste. Kalpana Kannabiran in her paper "Reconstructing Patriarchy"¹⁵ addresses herself to the claim that feminism is irrelevant in India since the feminine power principle is built into Hindu society and has the sanction of religion. Her main argument in this paper is that "patriarchy is basic to the caste system and that the worship of the Goddess in no way contradicts the institutionalised oppression of women. All these seemingly contradictory facts are seen as existing in a continuum at different points and actively reinforcing and perpetuating oppression in various spheres of life. And the continuum viewed as a whole offers us the model of patriarchy with all its concomitants in Hindu society".¹⁶

She draws heavily on Nripendra Kumar Dutt¹⁷ whose definition

of caste goes as follows: "Without attempting to make a comprehensive definition it may be stated that the most apparent features of the present day caste system are that the members of the different castes cannot have matrimonial connections with any but persons of their own caste, that there are restrictions, though not so rigid as in the matter of marriage, about a member eating and drinking with that of a different caste, that in many castes there are fixed occupations for different castes, that there is some hierarchical graduation among the castes, the most recognised position being that of Brahmins at the top; that birth alone decides a man's connection with his caste for life, unless expelled for violation of his caste rules, and that transition from one caste to another higher or lower is not possible. The prestige of the Brahmin is the corner stone of the whole organisation."¹⁸

While the whole historical argument which Kalpana makes cannot be repeated here, I would like to restate two points of her analysis which I feel are very important.

1. She shows that subjugation of women into slavery is very ancient and can be traced back to Rigvedic hymns. She thus concludes that sexual subjugation and reification of women goes back to pre-Rigvedic time. She concludes: "It is my thesis that patriarchy is in fact the basis of the caste system and that the patterns of hierarchy, power and authority which characterise the caste system are derived from earlier forms of gender based oppression."¹⁸
2. The second important point she makes is that incorporation of goddess-religion into Brahminic religion, especially in the Puranic text of the *Devi Mahatmya*, is a device to integrate the goddess into an androcentric patriarchal framework. This counters the claim that Hinduism is by itself feminist since it promotes goddess religion and shows how promotion of the goddess image can go together with enhanced caste restrictions on women.

The drawback with Kalpana's position is that, while it makes plausible that subjugation of women *preceded* *varna* and *jati*, it virtually suggests a monocausal explanation for the caste system. The question then remains why patriarchy, which has preceded slavery and class society in other parts of the world as well,²⁰ should have

caused caste in India but not elsewhere. It may be useful at this point to go back to Kalpana's discussion on a different origin of the caste system, not based on the theory of invasion, which is represented by Morton Klass.²¹

Morton Klass sees *jati* and sub-caste as fundamentally distinct from *varna* and rejects both the racial theory and the invasion theory for the origin of caste. He sees caste mainly as a marriage circle which regulates the access to resources in the villages and the exchange of services. The crucial step in the creation of caste in his view is therefore that from tribal exogamy to caste endogamy. His view of the functioning of the caste system is not really contestable. It also tallies with N.K. Dutt's above mentioned definition. The ground on which Kalpana Kannabiran rejects Klass is solely Klass' contention that the marriage circle in itself is "egalitarian". She rightly points out that this does not account for hierarchy in terms of age and subjugation of women within the caste. While this point is well taken, it is not sufficient ground to reject Klass' thesis lock, stock and barrel.

As Gail Omvedt has pointed out, Klass' is one of the most comprehensive and coherent explanations of the caste system ever developed.²² It is also the only theory which explains why the caste system should be more rigid in the South than the North, which is not accounted for in the invasion theories. The theory, as Klass evolves it, does not rule out the history of invasions and conquest as such. He only rejects this history as a conclusive explanation for caste and also points out that warfare and subjugation was going on among Aryans and among Dravidians as well so that a case of subjugation of a homogeneous pre-Aryan population by a homogeneous Aryan race cannot be made. Thus, an argument needs to be made for a multi-causal explanation of caste and for a differentiated understanding of the caste specific functioning of patriarchy. I will come back to this point after going into some of the underlying Dalit conceptualisations on the relationship between caste and patriarchy.

2. Conceptualisations in the dalit movement

Here, too, I would like to start with the perceptions of the Dalit activists involved in the above mentioned cases. As far as the

Bodi riots are concerned, the investigations confined themselves to factual observations on the murder of Muttupillai. There was also a tendency to play down the remarks by John Pandian and to see them as a simple aspiration for intermarriage. No investigation seems to have been made which would have established how Dalit women were specifically affected during the Bodi riots.

As far as the Allalaperi issue is concerned, an interesting shift in perceptions can be registered. The secretary of IDLM had in numerous earlier discussions taken the line that patriarchy was a Brahmin invention and that, therefore, while upper caste women may be in need of the women's movement, Dalit women do not need it since they can fight patriarchy through the caste struggle. He pointed out that Dalit women had a high level of mobilisation, but admitted that they were not in decision making bodies. However, he claimed that this could be changed easily. This was echoed by other Dalit activists who held that the women's movement was a middle class phenomenon which had no grasp of Dalit issues and that Dalit women were facing patriarchy only as an external phenomenon, not from within the caste.

This position had been challenged some weeks earlier during a workshop with Ruth Manorama who made a forceful plea for autonomy for Dalit women and demanded that the women's movement should take up the issues of Dalit women. When the Allalaperi issue cropped up, it had every potential to develop into a communal riot since the administration and the police were overwhelmingly manned by Thevars. To turn to other movements became virtually a matter of survival. Interaction with the women's movement has ruled out compromise on rape cases and has also challenged patriarchal terms of functioning like the leadership cult and undemocratic decision making. It has also raised the question of organisational representation of Dalit women.

Apart from such approaches to the handling of concrete incidents and to organisational questions, there is also a popular perception current which is something like the extension of the Dravidian notion of history.²³ The Dravidian movement, in a reversal of the Aryan myth, on the one hand maintained a theory of Aryan invasions which are seen as the cause of the caste system, and on the other hand the existence of an independently ruled

Dravida Nadu upto the time of the British conquest.

Similarly, Dalit leaders trace caste to the Aryan conquest while at the same time claiming a continuous heritage of egalitarian culture among themselves. This includes the claim of a non-patriarchal cultural heritage which is not necessarily born out by facts either in the Dravidian or the Dalit movement. However, as Nasir Tyabji has pointed out, such claims can make their own contribution to social reform. At the same time, they seem to be non-consequential in moments of acute caste confrontations between Dalits and Backward Castes.

It may be useful at this point to go back to the writings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar which are strikingly different from these popularised Dravidian and Dalit versions of history. Unfortunately, Ambedkar, though aware of women's position in general, has not integrated his analysis of caste with an analysis of patriarchy. He confines himself to general observations like the following: "From time immemorial man, as compared with woman, has had the upper hand. He is a dominant figure in every group and of the two sexes has greater prestige. With this traditional superiority of man over woman his wishes have always been consulted. Woman, on the other hand, has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions, religious, social or economic. But man, as a maker of injunctions, is most often above them all."²⁴

While he sees a connection between social evils like *sati*, child marriage, ban on widow remarriage, caste and untouchability, his preoccupation is clearly with untouchability and caste. Yet, his writings are not only relevant to rethink drastically on racial theories of invasion, they also lend themselves for drawing further connections between caste and patriarchy and also for critical introspection, both among feminists and Dalits. While this is not the place to give a full summary of Dr. Ambedkar's theory on the origin of caste and untouchability as he evolved it over the decades, it may be useful to highlight some of the important features.

Even in his earliest writings, where Ambedkar debates with colonial theories of caste by authors like Senart, Nesfield and Risley, he rejects the racial theory and theories of conquest. He also sees division of labour only as an aspect but not as a root

cause of caste. He argues that "critical evaluation of the various characteristics of caste leave no doubt that prohibition, or rather absence of intermarriage—endogamy, to be concise—is the only one that can be called the essence of caste when rightly understood."²⁵

Surprisingly, he also does not see Brahmins as the imposers of the caste system. While there is no doubt that they promoted and propagated it in the shastras, they did not have, according to Ambedkar, the means of coercion to *impose* this system. "The Brahmins may have been guilty of many things, and I dare say they were, but imposing of the caste system on the non-Brahmin population was beyond their mettle. They may have helped the process by their glib philosophy, but they certainly could not have pushed their scheme beyond their own confines."²⁶

He sees the process of endogamy as starting from the Brahmins but getting spread both by manipulation as well as imitation: some closed the doors and some found them closed. He sees caste not as a direct continuity of *varna* but as a process of its own, consisting of the splitting up into endogamous units. He emphasises the role of imitation—both conscious and unconscious—in the process of the formation of caste.²⁷ In some of his later writings he goes into greater detail and rejects division of labour as a rationale for the caste system²⁸ as well as the argument of maintenance of "purity of blood", since the system originated after mixing of populations had already taken place.²⁹ In his early writings of 1916 Ambedkar comes very close to Morton Klass' version of seeing caste as a "marriage circle" which regulates access to resources as well as exchange of services based on territoriality and kinship.

Beyond economic aspects, this also allows for what some anthropologists have called analysis of "culture as an energy capturing system"³⁰ which comprises aspects of production, distribution and cultural exchange. In his later writings his focus shifts to a head-on attack on the Hindu religion as the ideological force which sanctifies the system. This comes after efforts to overcome caste by involvement in the working class movement.³¹

As far as the historical aspects are concerned, Ambedkar not only sees a major difference between *varna* and caste as a marriage

circle, he also sees untouchability as having come into being at a much later stage than the rules of purity and pollution. His thesis on untouchability is summarised as follows:

1. There is no racial difference between Hindus and Untouchables.
2. This distinction between the Hindus and Untouchables in its original form, before the advent of Untouchability, was the distinction between Tribesmen and Broken Men from alien tribes. It is the Broken Men who subsequently came to be treated as Untouchables.
3. Just as Untouchability has no racial basis so also it has no occupational basis.
4. There are two roots from which Untouchability has sprung: (a) contempt and hatred of the Broken Men as of Buddhists by the Brahmins; and (b) continuation of beef-eating by the Broken Men after it has been given up by others.
5. In searching for the origin of Untouchability care must be taken to distinguish the Untouchables from the Impure. All orthodox Hindu writers have identified the Impure with the Untouchables. This is an error. Untouchables are distinct from the Impure.
6. While the Impure as a class come into existence at the time of the Dharma Sutras, the Untouchables come into being much later than 400 AD.³²

Concluding observations

Where does this leave us as far as the relationship between caste and patriarchy is concerned? And what does it mean for our approach to the life problems of Dalit women? Some observations may be in order which can help us to deepen our understanding further.

1. As far as the functioning of caste is concerned, the primary emphasis of Dr. Ambedkar and Morton Klass on caste as a marriage circle is certainly the crucial aspect. Without endogamy, caste cannot be maintained. However, even if inter-marriage takes place, patriarchy needs to be abolished since otherwise the woman will be subsumed under the husband's caste.

2. This is also borne out by the observation that intermarriage and even fantasies about intermarriage and interdining are major factors in triggering off caste riots in Tamil Nadu today. There is a need to work out a feminist position on this issue by Dalit women themselves since otherwise the debate deviates into the rape fantasies of men.
3. The observation of Kalpana Kannabiran that caste in itself is not egalitarian but practices discrimination of age and sex is valid among all castes today, including Dalits. At the same time, caste as a functioning solidarity network in the form of extended kinship also needs to be understood since it is one of the reasons for the tenacity of caste.
4. The Aryan invention theory has penetrated into feminist and Dalit analysis alike. While it is partly valid in analysing early forms of *varna* and of subjugation of women, it becomes misleading where it links up with colonial racial theories which are then projected as a monocausal explanation for the origin of caste and patriarchy.
5. Such monocausal explanations are weakening our perceptions. In the discourse of the women's movement they have led to a preoccupation with Brahminic sexual controls over women and an idealisation of low caste and tribal sexual freedom, while the collective rape of Dalit and Adivasi women, though a well-known phenomenon, remains very difficult to tackle. In the Dalit movements, racial theory has led to an externalization of the enemy so that patriarchy and casteism among Dalits cannot sufficiently be tackled. Facing patriarchy and casteism within is an essential exercise for both the women's movement and the Dalits in order to overcome these phenomena.
6. The explanations of Morton Klass and Dr. Ambedkar are essential for understanding the deep-rootedness of the caste system, especially in the South, since a theory of invasion is totally inadequate here. At the same time, neither Morton Klass nor Dr. Ambedkar go into an analysis of how the closing into endogamous marriage circles is related to patriarchal controls over women. The specific functioning of patriarchy in different caste contexts needs to be understood.

7. Taking up this analysis, transition from matrilineal to patrilineal systems is an important aspect. However, even matrilineal systems have forms of patriarchal authority which is vested in maternal uncles and male cousins. It is important to see how the system operates. Some of the backward castes who today are involved in gang rape of Dalit women, practice uncle and maternal cousin marriage which originates from matrilineal customs. They have also taken to female infanticide among their own families. Thus, abstract notions about patriline and matriline may not be too helpful here.
8. Ambedkar's distinction between purity and pollution and the phenomenon of untouchability remains important. In the South, the origin of untouchability can clearly be traced to the anti-Buddhist and anti-Jain counter reformations. The impact of this situation on the development of patriarchy needs to be studied. Apart from this we in the women's movement need to acknowledge that the anti-Brahmin movements, though shaking Brahminism and strengthening the backward castes, have not tackled untouchability. In general, anti-Brahminism does not deliver the goods. We need to spell out what is our contribution to the struggles of Dalit women.
9. The logic of solidarity has to be one of down-casteing and down-classing, not of social uplift. In fact, the whole hierarchy of the caste system has to be broken down by coming down to earth as far as our development concepts and perception of environmental questions go. The Gandhian option of denouncing untouchability but leaving the caste division of labour concept intact has been rejected by Ambedkar and the Dalit movement. The Hindu chauvinist approach which glosses over caste in the name of a Hindu nation is another device to make social reality invisible. Traditionally, Dalits have had to do with safeguarding village boundaries, regulating the irrigation in the village and agricultural labour. It will be important to understand more about their culture and their contribution to village ecology, in order to get away from a perception of victimisation only and to work toward identification of their contribution to the production of life.
10. A commitment to the Dalit cause also involves organisational

questions. The participation of Dalit women in their organisations needs to be strengthened. Whether these should be women's fronts or women's platforms is an open debate. However, this may be decided in concrete situations. The cause of Dalit women can only be strengthened if we in the autonomous women's movement also make an effort to reach out to Dalit movements. This, in turn, also requires drastic rethinking in the Dalit movement on patriarchy and on the women's movement. The principle of autonomy, which has protected women's issues from being hijacked by political parties, also holds a lesson for Dalit movements who have leaned heavily on political patronage, and this has often aggravated situations of caste conflicts. At the same time, the Dalit movement keeps reminding us that caste cannot be wished away but needs to be faced squarely.

From Reflections on the Women's Movement: Religion, Ecology, Development, 1992, New Delhi: Horizon India, pp. 73–93.

Dalit Women Talk Differently

GOPAL GURU

Over the last several decades women's issues have become a part of global public agenda. While it is due to their ceaseless struggles that women have acquired visibility at the global level, women's assertion assumes particular expression by operating on a particular terrain shaped by forces of a particular country. The scenario of the women's movement in India, particularly in the context of the Beijing conference, is characterized by simultaneous mobilization of women by different autonomous feminist groups and by groups affiliated to formal political formations. In a situation, where the organization of politics around difference has become a major feature of feminist politics, the organization of dalit women around the notion of difference is bound to be a logical outcome. An independent and autonomous assertion of dalit women's identity found its first expression in the formation of National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) at Delhi on August 11.

In order to understand the dalit women's need to talk differently it is necessary to delineate both the internal and external factors that have bearing on this phenomenon. Some women activists apprehend that contingent factors like the upcoming Beijing conference were responsible for the national level meet at Delhi. It may be true that the all India mobilization of dalit women, which is a culmination of such conferences previously held at Bangalore, Delhi and Pune during the last couple of years, was visualized by the dalit women activists keeping in view the representation of dalit women at the Beijing conference. However, the issue of representing dalit women, both at the level of theory and politics, has

erupted time and again in the discourse on dalit women. Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenizing the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits).

Social location which determines the perception of reality is a major factor (as we shall see in the context of argument made by dalit women) that make the representation of dalit women's issues by non-dalit women less valid and less authentic. But this claim of dalit women activists does not mean a celebration of plural practices of feminism. However, there are feminists who seek to understand the need to talk differently, keeping in mind certain external factors. For example, Gail Omvedt would link the dalit need to talk differently vis-à-vis the left forces to the betrayal of the promises given to the dalits by the latter. Rajni Kothari shares the same opinion but rather differently. He says, "With the erosion of institutions, the unsettled controversies over public policies, and the growing uncertainty over ideological issues, as well as the decline of democratic functioning of the political process, faith in the capacity of the modern nation-state to provide a framework of both order and equity has declined, and so too the reliance on mainstream governmental and party political process. The result has been the rise of a series of movements as distinct from the earlier gainer of more specific economic movements such as trade union or co-operative movements." Kothari calls this phenomenon of 'talking differently' a 'discourse of descent'.

But focusing on certain external factors does not provide access to the complex reality of dalit women. For example the question of rape cannot be grasped merely in terms of class, criminality, or as a psychological aberration or an illustration of male violence. The caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude. This differential experience was expressed by dalit women activists at the Delhi meet and also previously at a conclave organized by Satyashodhak Mahila Aghadi in Maharashtra. However, these activists lament that the caste factor does not get adequate recognition in the analysis done by non-dalit, middle-class, urbanized women activists.

Dalit women did appreciate feminist radicalism in the early phase of new peasant movements in Maharashtra. Yet, they did not approve of the ultimate subordination of the dalit voice to the dominant voice of the Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra and the Kayut Sangha in Karnataka. They questioned the populism of these peasant movements who, representing the interests of rich farmers entered into direct contradiction with the interests of dalit agricultural labourers over the issue of minimum wages.

Secondly, dalit women would not make common cause with the 'moral economy' advocated by the Shetkari Sanghatana and its feminist supporters. They are of the opinion that the moral economy of the Sanghatana offered no solution to their poverty, instead it sought to naturalize their poor living conditions. Dalit women are also not well disposed to the eco-feminist call for development of environmental consciousness. In fact, dalit men and women from Kannad taluka of Aurangabad district uprooted saplings planted by the social forestry department. Now, some environmentalists might remark that these dalit women lack ecological understanding. But the fact of the matter is that these dalits have been denied legitimate piece of land from the ceiling land which the village landlords still control. Further, the dalits do not have equal access to common property resources of the village. In fact, the experience of gram panchayats in Uttar Pradesh shows that an egalitarian distribution of landholding is a precondition for tension-free management of forest resources.

Thirdly, the claim for women's solidarity at both national and global levels subsumes contradictions that exist between high caste and dalit women. The latent manifestations of these contradictions involve subtle forms of caste discrimination as practised by upper caste upper class women against dalit women in the urban areas and resorting to slander of dalit women in rural areas. The contradictions also take a violent form as when the Shiv Sena women attacked dalit women in Sawali village of Chandrapur district in 1988. Thus, beneath the call for women's solidarity the identity of the dalit woman as 'dalit' gets whitewashed and allows a 'non-dalit' woman to speak on her behalf. It is against this background that dalit women have of late protested against their 'guest appearances' in a text or a speech of a non-dalit woman and instead

organized on their own terms. They consider the feminist theory developed by non-dalit women as unauthentic since it does not capture their reality. This comprehension gets clearly reflected in the 12-point agenda adopted by the NFDW and in several papers presented by the dalit women at the Maharashtra Dalit Women's Conference held in Pune in May 1995. Dalit women define the concept of dalit strictly in caste terms, refuting the claim of upper caste women to dalithood. Dalit women activists quote Phule and Ambedkar to invalidate the attempt of a non-dalit woman to don dalit identity.

Dalit patriarchy

Besides these external factors, there are certain internal factors that have prompted dalit women to organize separately vis-à-vis the dalit men. In the post-Ambedkar period, dalit leaders have always subordinated, and at times suppressed an independent political expression of dalit women. This political marginalisation has been openly condemned by dalit women at the regional conferences of dalit women and at the Delhi meet.

It is not only in the political arena that dalit women face exclusion. In the cultural field, for instance, dalit women have criticized their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene. Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it. Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top positions in dalit literary conferences and institutions. This dissent brings to fore three things: (1) It is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (2) dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them; (3) the experience of dalit women shows that local resistance within the dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to defend the claim of dalit women to talk differently.

Firstly, defended independent assertion of dalit women should not be viewed by dalit men as divisive; instead, it ought to be seen as carrying positive emancipatory potential. It can lead to a meaningful engagement of their creative energies. Secondly, the autonomous mobilization of dalit women can also be understood

from an epistemological standpoint. This perspective maintains that the less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others. It has to be noted that though there are some non-dalit women activists sensitive to the caste dimensions of women's exploitation, their stand has remained ambivalent regarding the critique of caste.

Dalit women's claim to 'talk differently' assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, 'talking differently' can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of dalit woman to speak on behalf of dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of 'talking differently' foregrounds the identity of dalit women.

Though it is difficult at this stage to make any definitive comments on the dalit women's movement, one can question the validity of the above assumptions. There is a notable shift taking place in the location of dalit women. Dalit women from Maharashtra are better educated and employed than their counterparts from Karnataka. And it would be the former who would represent dalit women at Beijing. Thus, here too, a certain section of dalit women will be rendered anonymous. That is why the second point in the agenda of NFDW mentions the need to associate with grassroots dalit women. Further, for challenging male dominance in politics, dalit women are dependent on the state to create a space for them. This exposes them to the danger of co-option as was the case with their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the process of empowerment of dalit women makes the terrain of nation-state more contested.

Also the Indian state is keen on projecting itself as well-intentioned on gender issues and has sponsored the delegation of Indian women to Beijing. The state by incorporating women's movement within the jurisdiction of its apparatus intends to 'domesticate' the movement. Hence, the crucial question which arises with regard to the NFDW is whether it will succeed in evading this trap of domestication. On the basis of available evidence it is possible to argue that dalit women can challenge the state

and state-mediated dalit patriarchy. This was proved when dalit women of Bodha Gaya in Bihar who opposed the state's decision to hand over land in the names of dalit men since it would further marginalise them. Dalit women under the Bahujan Mahila Aghadi and Shetmajur Shetkari Shramik Aghadi in Maharashtra oppose the process of globalisation. Incidentally, the newly-formed NFD women also has made clear its intention to fight the Indian state's new economic policy of privatisation and globalisation.

Dalit women, particularly at the grassroots level in Maharashtra, are exhibiting a spontaneous and strong solidarity across caste and region against the violence let loose by the Hindutva forces. Dalit women are participating in the ongoing struggle regarding pasture land. In this context the anti-Hindutva campaign organized by Women's Voice of Bangalore, which is a major component of NFDW, deserves mention. Thus, dalit women's perception while critical of the homogenization of dominant discourse does not make a fetish of its own reality, and therefore, prevents the ghettoisation of dalithood.

Published in Economic and Political Weekly; October 14–21, 1995, pp. 2548–50.

Why I am not a Hindu

KANCHAI LAIAH

Man and Woman Relations

Are the man-woman relations of Dalitbahujan families and Hindu families the same? In my view there is a categorical difference. The martial life of every couple is based on the couple's respective childhood formations. But the significant difference between Dalitbahujans and Hindus in this context begins with an absolutely opposite approach to the concept of *kama* (sexual love). In both kinds of families, at the time of marriage the priest talks about *kaameecha*. For a Dalitbahujan couple and a Brahmin or a Baniya couple, the concept may appear to be strange in the beginning. There is an essential difference also in the practical and philosophical points of view. Indeed there is a paradox in the experiences and education of persons born in these two families. The Dalitbahujan couple would have heard about sexual desire from the experiences of parents, relations and friends. But in the narratives of Dalitbahujan Gods and Goddesses descriptions of *kama* are totally absent. They know nothing about the personal lives of Pochamma, Maisamma, Maramma, Potaraju, Malliah, and others. Each one of these Goddesses and Gods has a narrative. Even young people relate to these Goddesses and Gods but nowhere in those narratives does love appear as desire. The Brahmin-Baniyas impose a ban on sexual discourse at the human plane. The strict restriction imposed on women's mobility cuts down the interaction between men and women. It also cuts down the interaction between 'upper' caste and Dalitbahujan women. So the pleasures missing in the social plane in day-to-day living are sought to be derived from divine sexual experiences. To understand such paradoxes one

should understand the sexuality of the Hindu Goddesses and Gods.

The stories of Hindu Gods and Goddesses are full of descriptions of sexual encounters. The most powerful narrative exists in the form of Goddess and God relations among Hindu men and women. Krishna and Radha, Varudhini and Pravarakya. Shankara and Parvathi are well-known examples. But the most powerful story is that of Radha and Krishna. The most restrictive brahminical families not only permit young girls to worship Krishna who is a patriarchal sexist God but also to love him; a girl can invite him to bestow his love on her. He is carved into all sorts of poses and postures, colours and costumes. Many Hindu texts, the Bhagavad Gita is an exception, are full of such narratives. The most powerful text that influences Hindu thought in terms of man-woman relations is Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*. But for the leisure available at the disposal of brahminical families and the atmosphere in which they live, sixty-four forms of sexual expression could not have been possible. This life was projected as divine and hence even the Hindu temples become the places where Vatsyayana's sixty-four forms are part of the sculpture.

The man-woman relationship in Dalitbahujan families is markedly different. The sexual relationship has never been projected as an art form. This does not mean they do not sing songs based on love stories. They sing love stories of the people around them. The narrative is basically secular. Yet another big difference between the family life of the Hindus and the Dalitbahujan castes is that the Hindus make sex a leisure-bound divine activity whereas among the Dalitbahujans, family life is a part of production. For them leisure and holiday are unknown. In certain castes interaction between wife and husband is often momentary. For example, in Kurumaa families, during the day the man would go into the forest with the sheep or goats and in the night he would usually sleep with the herd. The woman would perform all the family tasks: the purchasing, looking after the children, etc. If there were no wool-related work, she would take on agrarian tasks in order to add to the income. In all these operations she would deal with civil society alone. Thus in these families the whole life-process gives little scope for divinity and pleasure. The man would meet his wife sometimes near midnight and go back to his herd.

In other words, man-woman relations among Dalitbahujans do not go beyond 'natural' relationships. For those who have not come in touch with letters, for those whose spiritual wisdom is primitive but natural because it has not acquired the character of manipulation and exploitation, the human touch is still retained. In these societies, hegemonic relations in the forms that are visible among the Hindus are absent. Here even sexual intercourse is an organic need of the body but not a pleasure of the heart. This undefined love retains its naturalness among the Dalitbahujans. Among the Hindus the man-woman relationship is conditioned by manipulation and deceptivity. Dalitbahujan relationships on the other hand are based on openness.

A consciousness that gives more importance to nature than to sacred beings is always stronger. It is a consciousness that constructs its own kind of character. This character is different from that moulded by the fear of external agencies. The Dalitbahujans of India are the only people on the globe who, while living in a civil society, have lived outside the defined structures of all religions. Take, for example, their marriage contract. It is basically a human contract. It is governed by the rights guaranteed to women within the framework of the broad system of patriarchy. A situation of disrespect to each other's rights can result in breaking that contract and will result in divorce. If after divorce the woman or the man comes across another possible partner, either by way of parental arrangement or because of her/his own initiative, such individuals have the right to enter into another contract. Because of these inherently assured rights, a wife does not have to treat her husband as a God. A Dalitbahujan woman does not have to perform *pada-puja* (worshipping the husband's feet) to her husband either in the morning or in the evening. She does not have to address her husband in the way she would address a superior. In a situation of dispute, word in response to word, and abuse for abuse is the socially visible norm. Patriarchy as a system does exist among Dalitbahujans, yet in this sense it is considerably more democratic.

A Dalitbahujan couple may also aspire for a son but for entirely different reasons as compared to the Hindus. As I said earlier, among the Dalitbahujans the son is not a divine gift to take the father to heaven. A son in their view is a relatively more productive

force. This view itself is based on an unscientific understanding, which is governed by human limitations and also conditioned by the process of their development. The Dalitbahujan personality hangs between materialism and spiritualism, whereas the Hindu personality is made out of decadent spiritualism. In this decadent spiritualism, marriage, market, manhood and womanhood are structured in irrational forms. Hindu values mould individuals who cannot tolerate the spiritual equality of others. In its day-to-day operations a Hindu family does not run on a human plane. It is a divinely-animated collective affair. It has established institutional structures that do not reflect a spiritual system that can draw more and more human beings into it. Dalitbahujan spiritualism on the contrary is non-religious but humane.

If Hinduism were to establish, even within the spiritual domain, an attractive relationship of humanity, perhaps Hinduism would have become a universal religion earlier than Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. The family structure that it established, instead of attracting fellow human beings, repelled them. It established a market system that created structures that sucked the energy of Dalitbahujan masses who were denied even that notional right to swarga. The Hindus are the only people who converted even spirituality and the promise of redemption in the other world into the private property of only Brahmins, Vaisyas and Kshatriyas. Unfortunately, the 'Sudra upper castes' (like Reddies, Kammas, Velamas in Andhra Pradesh; Marathas, Patels, Jats, Rajputs, Bhumihars in North India) who are emerging slowly as neo-Kshatriyas are moving into the fold of Hindutva both physically and mentally.

From Kancha Ilaiah, Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy, 1996, Calcutta: Samya, pp. 32-35.

A Dalit Feminist Standpoint*

SHARMILA REGE

The feminism that developed in the 1970s differed from the left in three crucial areas—the categories of woman, experience and personal politics, all of which were central to feminist theorization. Though powerful as political rhetoric these categories posed theoretical problems. The category ‘woman’ was conceived as being based on the collective state of women being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood. As the three categories were deployed in combination it often led to exclusions around race, class, caste and ethnicity.

Since many of the vocal feminists of the 1970s were white, middle class and university educated, it was their experience which came to be universalized as ‘women’s experience.’ Thus, sweeping statements such as ‘all women are niggers’ and ‘all women are dalits’ were made. The ambivalence of the left towards women’s issues was thus countered by an assertion that women essentially connected with other women; the ‘subjective experiences of knowledge’ became the basis of the theorizing universal experience of womanhood. ‘Experience’ thus became the base for personal politics as well as the only reliable methodological tool for defining oppression.¹ From such an epistemological position, there was either a complete invisibility of the experiences of dalit women

* A more detailed version of the paper was first presented at a seminar organized by the Vikas Adhyayan Kendra in March 1998 at Pune and published in their journal *Vikalp*. It is part of a larger ongoing project and in that sense is not final. The paper draws upon our understanding of and engagement with the contemporary women’s movement in Maharashtra.

or at best only a token representation of their voices. There was thus a masculinization of dalithood and a savarnisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of dalit womanhood.

The 1970s and early '80s were times of the 'reinvention of revolution'² and saw the emergence of several organizations and fronts—the Shramik Mukti Sanghatana, Satyashodhak Communist Party, Shramik Mukti Dal, Yuvak Kranti Dal—all of which did not limit the dalit women to a token inclusion; their revolutionary agenda, in different ways, accorded a central role to dalit women. This was, however, not the case with the two other movements of the period—the Dalit Panthers and the women's movement as constituted mainly by the left party based women's fronts and the newly emergent autonomous women's groups. The Dalit Panthers did make a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s, but both in their writings and their programme, dalit women remained firmly encapsulated in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimized sexual being'.

The left party based women's organizations highlighted economic and work related issues and also helped develop a critique of the patriarchal, capitalist state. The autonomous women's groups politicized and made public the issue of violence against women. Though this led to serious debates on class versus patriarchy, these formations did not address the issue of Brahminism. While for the former 'caste' was contained in class, for the latter, the notion of sisterhood was pivotal. All women came to be conceived as 'victims' and therefore 'dalit', resulting in a classical exclusion. (All 'dalits' are assumed to be male and all women 'savarna'.) It may be argued that since the categories of experience and personal politics were at the core of the epistemology and politics of the Dalit Panther and the women's movement, this resulted in a universalization of what in reality was the middle class, upper caste women's experience or alternatively the dalit male experience.

The autonomous women's groups of the early 1980s remained largely dependent on the left framework even as they challenged it. As the women's movement gathered momentum, sharp critiques of mainstream conceptualizations of work, development, legal processes and the state emerged leading to several theoretical and praxiological reformulations. Debates on class versus patriarchy

were politically enriching for both parties to the debate. It must be underlined that many of the feminist groups broadly agreed that in the Indian context a materialistic framework was central to the analysis of women's oppression. However, in keeping with their roots within the 'class' framework, they made greater effort to draw commonalities across class than caste or community.

This is apparent in the major campaigns launched by the women's movement during this period. The absence of an analytical frame, which in the tradition of Phule and Ambedkar viewed caste hierarchies and patriarchies as intrinsically linked, is apparent in the anti-dowry, anti-rape and anti-violence struggles of the women's movement.

An analysis of the practices of the caste basis of violence against women reveals that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent control and regulation of their mobility and sexuality by the family is frequent among the dominant upper castes, dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the work place and in public.

Consider the statements issued by the women's organizations during the Mathura rape case. While the NFIW looked at rape in 'class' terms, the socialist women talked in terms of the 'glass vessel cracking' and therefore in terms of loss of honour, and the AIWC provided psychological explanations of the autonomous women's groups highlighting the use of patriarchal power.³ Looking back at the anti-rape agitation, it is apparent that the sexual assaults on dalit women in Marathwada during the 'namantar' movement did not become a nodal point for such an agitation, in fact they come to be excluded. The campaign therefore became more of a single issue one.

Consider also the campaign against dowry. While the left women's organizations viewed dowry in terms of the ways in which capitalism was developing in India, the autonomous women's groups focused on patriarchal power/violence within the family. The present practices of dowry need to be viewed in the context of processes of Brahminisation and their impact on marriage practices. That the Brahminic ideals led to a preference for dowry marriage is well documented. In fact it was the colonial establish-

ment of the legality of the Brahma form of marriage that institutionalized and expanded the dowry system. The Brahminising castes adopted the Brahma form of marriage over the other forms and thereby established 'dowry' as an essential ritual.⁴ Moreover, the principle of endogamy and its coercive and violent perpetuation through collective violence against inter-caste alliances are crucial to the analysis of dowry.

The relative absence of caste as a category in the feminist discourse on violence has also led to the encapsulation of the Muslim and Christian women within the understanding of 'talaq' and 'divorce'. In retrospect, it is clear that while the left party based women's organizations collapsed caste into class, the autonomous women's groups collapsed caste into sisterhood, both leaving Brahminism unchallenged. Though the movement did address issues concerning women of the dalit, tribal and minority communities and has made substantial gains, a feminist politics centering around the women of the most marginalised communities could not emerge.

The history of agitations and struggles of the second wave of the women's movement is a history of articulations of strong anti-patriarchal positions on different issues. Issues of sexuality and sexual politics, which are crucial for a feminist politics, remained largely within an individualistic and lifestyle frame. Since issues of sexuality are intrinsically linked to caste, addressing sexual politics without challenging Brahminism results in lifestyle feminism. During the post-Mandal agitations and the caste violence at Chunduru and Pimpri Deshmukh in Maharashtra, women of the upper castes were invoked as feminist subjects—assertive, non-submissive and protesting against injustice done to them as women and as citizens.

In the anti-Mandal protests young middle class women declared that they were against all kinds of reservations (including those for women); they mourned the death of merit and explicated that they were out to save the nation.⁵ At Pimpri Deshmukh in Maharashtra, following the brutal killing of a dalit *kotwal* (also an active mobiliser for the local Buddha Vihar) by upper caste men, upper caste women publicly complained that he had harassed them and was sexually perverted. They claimed to have incited their men

to protect their honour, thereby invoking the agency of upper caste women. The issue was not merely one of molestation or of violence against dalits, but one that underlines the complex reformulations that Brahminical patriarchies undergo in order to counter collective dalit resistance.

The increasing visibility of dalit women in power structures as sarpanch, as members of the panchyat and in the new knowledge-making processes (such as Bhanwari Devi's intervention through the Saathin programme) has led to an increased backlash against dalit women. The backlash is expressed through a range of humiliating practices and often culminates in rape or the killing of their kinsmen. Such incidents underline the need for a dialogue between dalit and feminist activists since inter-caste relations at the local level may be mediated through a redefinition of gendered spaces. The emancipatory agenda of the dalit and women's movements will have to be sensitive to these issues and underline the complex interplay between caste and gender as structuring hierarchies in society.

In times of globalization and Hindutva, gender issues are being appropriated as cultural issues. This calls for a reformulation of our feminist agenda, to reclaim our issues and reconceptualise them such that feminist politics poses a challenge to the caste/class conceptualization of Brahminical Hindutva. Such a reconceptualization calls for a critique of Brahminical hierarchies from a gender perspective. Such critique have the potential of translating the discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestation of hierarchies. In the Brahminic social order, the caste based and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed such that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. Such a linkage operates on presumptions about the accessibility of the sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahminism in turn locates this as a failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines it as a justification of their impurity. Thus gender ideology legitimises not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organization of caste.

Drawing upon Ambedkar's analysis, caste ideology (endogamy)

is the very basis of the regulation and organization of women's sexuality. Hence caste determines the division of labour, both sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour. Brahminisation is a two way process of acculturation and assimilation and throughout history there has been Brahminical refusal to universalize a single patriarchal mode. Thus the existence of multiple patriarchies is a result of both Brahminical conspiracy and of the relation of the caste group to the means for production. There are therefore both discrete (specific to caste) as well as overlapping patriarchal arrangements.

Hence women who are sought to be united on the basis of systematic overlapping patriarchies are nevertheless divided on caste/class lines and by their consent to patriarchies and their compensatory structures. If feminists have to challenge these divisions, their mode of organization and struggles 'should encompass all of the social inequalities that patriarchies are related to, embedded in and structured by.'⁶ Does the recent assertion of different voice of dalit women challenge these divisions? A review of the non-Brahminical renderings of women's liberation in Maharashtra is called for.

In the 1990s, there were several independent and autonomous assertions of dalit women's identity; a case in point is the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women and the All India Dalit Women's Forum. At the state level, the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana was formed in 1995. A year earlier, the women's wing of the Bharatiya Republican Party and the Bahujan Mahila Sangh set up the Bahujan Mahila Parishad. In December 1996, at Chandrapur, a Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad was organized and a proposal to commemorate 25 December (the day Ambedkar set fire to the *Manusmriti*) as *Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas* was advanced. The Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana, an organization of dalit-Christian women was established in 1997. Though these organizations have advanced different non-Brahminical ideological positions, they have come together on several issues such as the celebration of the Bharatiya Shree Mukti Divas and on the issue of reservation for OBC women in parliamentary bodies.

The emergence of autonomous dalit women's organizations has

led to major debate, sparked off by the essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently.'⁷ A series of discussions around the paper were organized in Pune by different feminist groups. A two day seminar was also organized by Alochana, Centre for Research and Documentation of Women, in June 1996. Subsequently, two significant responses to the emergence of autonomous dalit women's organizations—one by Kiran Moghe of the Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana and the other by Vidyut Bhagwat—presented the issues at stake. At the seminar, Gopal Guru argued that to understand the dalit women's need to talk differently, it was necessary to delineate both the internal and external factors which have a bearing on this phenomenon.

He located their need to talk differently in a discourse of dissent against the middle class women's movement, as also the dalit male movement and the moral economy of the peasant movements. In a note of dissent, he argued against their exclusion from both the political and cultural arenas. He further underlined that social location determines the perception of reality and therefore the representation of dalit women's issues by non-dalit women was less valid and less authentic. Though Guru's argument is well taken and we agree that dalit women must name the difference, a privileging of knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience as authentic may lead to a furthering of narrow identity politics. Such a narrow frame may well limit the emancipatory potential of the dalit women's organizations as also their epistemological standpoints.

Though the left party based women's organisations have viewed the emergence of autonomous women's organisations as a setting up of a separate hearth, they feel that Hindutva and the new economic policy have brought both formations closer, that the autonomous women's groups have once again come to share a common platform with the left. The subtext of the argument is that autonomy *ipso facto* is limiting and that the dalit women's autonomous organisations would face a threat from the masses in case they did not retain the umbilical relation with the Republican Party. In such a context, their efforts would be limited by the focus on the experiential and the intricacies of funding.

In a critique of Moghe's position, Bhagwat argued that her

position was lacking in self-reflexivity and that the enriching dialectics between the left parties and the autonomous women's groups had been overlooked in highlighting only one side of the story. To label any new autonomous assertion from the marginalised as 'identitarian and limited to experience', she argues, is to overlook the history of struggles by groups to name themselves and their politics.

Several apprehensions were raised about the Dalit Mahila Sanghatan's likelihood of becoming a predominantly neo-Buddhist women's organization. Pardeshi rightly argued that such apprehensions were insensitive and overlooked the historical trajectory of the growth of the dalit movement in Maharashtra. Yet she also cautioned that a predominantly neo-Buddhist, middle class leadership could have politically limiting consequences. For instance, she argued that at many of the proceedings of the Parishad, Brahmanisation came to be understood within a narrow frame of non-practice of trisaran and panchasheel. Such a frame could limit the participation by middle caste women.⁸

There are as of today, at least three major contesting and overlapping positions which have emerged from the struggles and politics of dalit women in Maharashtra. The earliest well-defined position is the Marxist/Phule/Ambedkarite position of the Satyashodak Mahila Sabha.⁹ A position emerging out of the dalit-bahujan alliance is that of the Bahujan Mahila Mahasangh (BMM) which critiques the Vedic Brahmanical tradition and seeks to revive the bahujan tradition of the 'adimaya'.

It criticizes the secular position as Brahmanical and individualistic and underlies the Ambedkarite conceptualization of dhamma in community life. It opposes the common civil code and upholds customary law and community based justice. Significantly, the BMM seeks to combine both the struggle for political power and a cultural revolution in order to revive and extend the culture of bahujans.¹⁰ Such a position is crucial to the problematisation of the dominant Brahmanical culture and thereby underlines the materiality of culture. Yet it faces the danger of glorifying bahujan familial and community practices, since all traces of patriarchal power are negated by viewing them as a result of the processes of Brahmanisation.

The Dalit Mahila Sanghatana has criticized the persistence of 'manuvadi sanskriti' in the dalit male who otherwise traces his lineage to a Phule-Ambedkarite ideology. The Sanghatana proposes to foreground the most dalit of dalit women in its manifesto. The Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana, a dalit Christian women's organization, in its initial meetings debated the loss of traditional occupations of the converts, their transfer to the service sector, the hierarchies among the Christians by caste and region, and the countering of oppositional forces led by the church and state level Christian organizations.

These non-Brahmanical renderings of feminists politics have contributed to some self-reflexivity among the autonomous women's groups. Their responses can be broadly categorized as (a) a non-dialectical position of those who while granting that though historically it is now important that dalit women assume leadership, do not revision a non-Brahmanical feminist politics for themselves; (b) the left position which collapses caste into class and continues to question the distinct materiality of caste and has registered dissent to the declaration of 25 December as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas; (c) a self-reflexive position of these autonomous women's groups who recognize the need to reformulate and revision feminist politics since the non-Brahmanical renderings are viewed as more emancipatory. It is apparent that the issues underlined by the new dalit women's movement go beyond the naming of dalit women and call for a revolutionary epistemological shift to a dalit feminist standpoint.

The intellectual history of feminist standpoint theory can be traced to insights provided by Marx, Engels and Lukacs into the standpoint of the proletariat. A social history of standpoint theory focuses on what happens when marginalised peoples begin to gain public voice. The failure of dominant groups to critically and systematically interrogate their privileged position leaves them crippled, scientifically and epistemologically. A dalit feminist standpoint is viewed as emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e. the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position claims a higher emancipatory status than other positions and counters pluralism and relativism

which posit all knowledge-based and political claims as valid in their own way.

It emphasizes individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class and ethnicity which construct such groups. It is obvious that the subject/agent of dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous and even contradictory, i.e., the category 'dalit woman' is not homogenous. Such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of dalit feminist's liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, and sexuality all construct each other. Thus, the dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions.¹¹

The dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit women may originate in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals, but it cannot flourish if it is isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups and must educate itself about the histories, preferred social relations, the utopias and the struggles of the marginalised. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is feasible for subjectivities *can* be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' dalit women but they can 'reinvent' themselves as dalit feminists. Such a position, therefore avoids the narrow alley of direct experience based 'authenticity' and narrow 'identity politics'.

For many of us, non-dalit feminists, such a standpoint is more emancipatory in that it rejects more completely the relations of rule. Thus, adopting a dalit feminist standpoint position means sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning the 'voice' that we as feminists had gained in the 1980s. This process, we believe, is one of transforming individual feminists into oppositional and collective subjects.

Notes

- ¹ Judith Grant, *Fundamental Feminism*, Routledge, New York.
- ² For a detailed account of the emergence and politics of the different organizations and fronts in Maharashtra, see Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: India's New Social Movements*, Sharpe, New York.
- ³ For a detailed account see Supriya Akerkar, 'Theory and Practice of

Women's Movement in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, no. 17, 1995, WS 2-24.

- ⁴ See Sharad Patil, *Dasa-Shudra Slavery*, 1982. Allied Publishers, Bombay. This text is significant to all those seeking to develop a non-Brahmanical feminist historiography. It is rather unfortunate that there has been little debate on the text and it remains outside the mainstream feminist discourse.
- ⁵ See Susie Tharu and Tejaswani Niranjana, 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender in India'. *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, March-April 1994.
- ⁶ Kumkum Sangari's analysis of multiple and discrete patriarchies has been a significant contribution to feminist theorization in the Indian context. See Kumkum Sangari, 'Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 December 1995.
- ⁷ Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14-21 October 1995, pp. 2548-49.
- ⁸ The issue was debated in the Sunday edition of *The Maharashtra Times*, Mumbai 7 and 15 September, and in the *Samaj Prabhodan Patrika*. April-May 1996. A detailed discussion on Ambedkar and the question of women's emancipation in India is found in *Dr. Ambedkar aani Streemuktivaad* by Pratima Pardeshi, 1997. An English translation has been published by the Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune.
- ⁹ For more details see Sharad Patil, *Marxvaad Phule-Ambedkarvaad*. Sugava Prakashan, Pune, 1994.
- ¹⁰ Rekha Thakur, *Adimayachi Mukti*, Prabuddha Bharat Publications, Mumbai, 1996.
- ¹¹ The discussion on feminist standpoint epistemology is largely influenced by Sandra Harding, 'Subjectivity, Experience and Knowledge: An Epistemology from/for Rainbow Coalition Politics' in J: Pieterse (ed), *Emancipations: Modern and Postmodern*, Sage, New Delhi 1991.

References

- G. Alyosius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997.
- B.R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India. Speeches and Writings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*, Vol. I, Govt. of Maharashtra, Bombay 1990.
- S. Akerkar, 'Theory and Practice of Women's Movement in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 17, 1995 ws 2-24.
- N. Bhakre, *Punyatil Christi. Samajik Sanghatana aani Church hyanche Lingabhav Vishayak Drishtikon*. (The Dalit Christian Community in Pune and the Church: a focus on their conception of gender issues.) Women Studies Centre, Pune University, 1997.
- U. Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women, New Delhi 1998.
- G. Guru, *Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra*. Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai 1998.

- G. Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14–21 October 1995, pp. 2548–9.
- V. Kannabiran and K. Kannabiran, 'Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 37, 14 September 1991.
- R. Kothari, 'Rise of Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 June 1994, p. 1589–94.
- J. Liddle and R. Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*. Kali for Women, New Delhi 1986.
- M. Moon and U. Pawar, *Amhihi Itihas Ghadawila: Ambedakari Chalvalitil Streeyancha Sahabhag* (We Too Were Making History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement). Stree, Bombay 1989.
- R.O'Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India*, OUP, Madras 1994.
- G. Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India 1873–1930*. Indian Social Science Society, Bombay 1976.
- G. Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: India's New Social Movements*, Sharpe, New York 1993.
- G. Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, Sage, New Delhi 1994.
- P. Pardeshi, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Question of Women's Liberation in India* (Trans). Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune, Pune 1998.
- S. Patil, *Dasa-Sundra Slavery*, Allied Publishers, Bombay 1982.
- P. Jogdand (ed.), *Dalit Women*, Gyan, New Delhi 1994.
- S. Rege, 'Hegemonic Appropriation of Sexuality: The Case of the Erotic Lavani of Maharashtra'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 29, nos. 1–2, 1995.
- K. Sangari, 'Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 December 1995.
- S. Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, OUP, New Delhi 1997.
- S. Tharu and T. Niranjana, 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender in India'. *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, March–April 1994.
- R. Thakur, *Adimayache Mukti (Liberating the Mother Goddess)*. Prabhuddha Bharat, Mumbai 1996.
- V. Geetha, *Gender and Logic of Brahmanism: E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar and the Politics of the Female Body*. Paper presented at the seminar on Women's Studies, IIAS, Shimla 1992.

Published in Seminar 471, November 1998, pp. 47–52.

Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression

BELA MALIK

Fifty years after independence ritual pollution, caste exploitation and all the other legacies of Indian civilization that those who oppose affirmative action in the name of efficiency choose to ignore, and which those who oppose it from more prejudiced motives would like to perpetuate, are alive and well, keeping in good cheer the less polluting 'citizens' of the nation. And the images of all of these were graphically brought out at the Convention against Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression, organized by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) on December 20, 1998 at Delhi. All that was recounted at the convention highlighted the need to address the specific problem of caste oppression compounding the burdens imposed by a generalized patriarchal exploitation. Thousand-odd dalit women from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh participated in the convention, along with several guest speakers and AIDWA activists and sympathizers.

Dalit women speakers used the forum to articulate their problems and to share the experiences of their struggles. They were from diverse backgrounds, belonged to different age groups and had varying degrees of consciousness about the gap between the reality of their socio-economic conditions and the legal rights that they notionally possess. The degree of passion expressed varied accordingly. The younger women, for instance, were more militant and less willing to tolerate the terms of their existence. The women were mainly rural, though some activists were based in urban areas. Some women were politically active and held political office at

the panchayat level. Others were agricultural workers or construction labourers. Despite these differences, there were common threads running through their accounts. They narrated their experiences without hesitation, and in a wide and mutually incomprehensible variety of dialects rendering the term 'Hindi-speaking-belt' somewhat of a misnomer.

For the dalits, caste and class merge in subjecting them to the margins of India's political economy. The convention foregrounded the indignity being experienced and resisted by dalit women. Concentrated in the primary sector, only a fraction of land is owned by dalits, and holding on to land that is legally theirs more than not involves protracted and tenacious struggle. Resorting to a mere language of rights is inadequate as a solution to the experiences of this section living away from the middle class world of rhetoric and debate.

In Haryana, for example, according to the 1991 census, only 8.06 per cent of scheduled castes own land, while 55.08 per cent are landless agricultural labourers. Land 'pattas' are never in dalit women's name. For dalits in general, access to schools and education is minimal. As an instance, in Rajasthan, only 8 per cent of dalit women are literate.

While it is true that dalits in general are oppressed, dalit women bear a disproportionately higher share of this burden. Given the division of labour within the household, women have to suffer more from the lack of access to water, fuel sources, and sanitation facilities, exposing them to humiliation and violence.

Upper caste women are often among the perpetrators of oppression. In this general environment, the contexted significance of a purely dalit or, more specifically, an exclusively dalit women platform seems only natural. Given the nature of oppression, a struggle for a better life for dalit women cannot, perhaps, be divorced from a wider social emancipatory agenda. It is often the case that a purely theoretical feminist argument asserting the equality of women is not adequately sensitive to the larger context of caste and class context in which oppression and inequality of women is practised. It remains a matter of reflection that those who have been actively involved with organizing women encounter difficulties that are nowhere addressed in a theoretical literature

whose foundational principles are derived from a smattering of normative theories of rights, liberal political theory, an ill-formulated left politics and more recently, occasionally, even a well-intentioned doctrine of 'entitlements'.

Dalit women face discrimination in access to a dignified life, to legal redress to claim what is theirs in principle, to equal wages, to the decision-making process, and to benefits from government initiated programmes targeted at their welfare. Issues of childcare and health are relegated to the background in a struggle for subsistence. The problem of being marginalized and therefore discriminated against is worsened by the practice of untouchability. Sharecropping, for example, is not extensive among dalit families due to the observance of ritual purity by caste groups. The grim reality of untouchability appears inescapable. It is there in schools, in tea shops, while labouring, while walking on public roads. The fear of indignity, humiliation and rape is always present. For instance, speakers reported that food was thrown to them as if they were dogs. The abuses were casteist "she looks like a 'chura'". Speakers also pointed out that casteism was practiced by people across religions. Caste becomes convenient in reinforcing existing inequities. Control over resources that fulfil fundamental human necessities is established unequally, in conformity with the coercive power of class. Its distribution, therefore, can only serve the ends of extended coercion.

Women participants were keenly aware that caste pollution, by either presence or touch, that operated so strongly in the case of conflict over public resources seemed not to matter at all in the extraction of labour. When it comes to taking water from a hand pump, notions of ritual purity are invoked, when it comes to the extraction of labour in the field, it does not matter at all that the seed is planted, the crop tended and the grain harvested by the same untouchable. The same applies in the case of rape as social revenge/punishment/coercion. By a curious quirk, the untouchable becomes socially touchable in more ways than one. The image of a homogeneous Hindu people in pursuit of a single civilizational dream was seen for the eyewash that it was by many speakers. Even in the case of purportedly so fundamental an aspect of life as worship, the invocation of the existence of caste to create separate

places of worship was emphasized. Even in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, which was ostensibly the act of a united Hindu community, all temples were not open to dalits.

The speakers were aware of the work of mobilization by the hindutva brigade in their midst. A strong sense of the limiting practice of untouchability was manifest. This consciousness raised some broader self-evident questions. Once this awareness exists, what is the mode of politics that becomes necessary? Secondly, what are the implications for a sociological analysis of Indian society insofar as a transformative knowledge or a transformative self-realization exists? Some sociological and anthropological, and from it, uncritically imitative historical writing pursuing knowledge from the perspective of identity, seems to evade altogether the transformative possibilities presented by such consciousness.

Be that as it may, this experience was common to the urban and rural parts of north India. While a comprehensive legislation, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of) Atrocities Act, 1989, exists on paper, social, political and economic pressures ensure that it remains ineffective. Of the innumerable cases of rape of dalit women, only a fraction of the victims lodge reports, an even smaller fraction is filed by the police, while actual conviction is negligible. The problem lies not so much with the law itself as with the context in which it exists.

The gravest problem is that of both an absolute and relative scarcity of drinking water. At common water sources, dalit women face humiliation, and are even deprived of water because upper castes assert their privilege in respect of drawing water. Unequal relations are compounded from the lack of equality in access to resources. The inequality is reproduced when, in exchange for permission to draw water from a public source, dalit women are forced to perform various menial tasks for upper caste women. The everyday act of collecting water invites many abuses and jibes. Many speakers complained of how they were made to beg for water, and after they were given permission to draw it, were made to scrub the hand pump clean.

In a country where sanitation is a scarce facility, and since what is scarce is subject to public disputes, the principle of distribution operates along a caste-class axis. The landless suffer, the

dalit landless suffer even more and dalit landless women suffer the most. Dalit women are often forced to use fields that belong to upper castes, leaving them susceptible to physical and mental harassment.

The problems arising from lack of literacy and education were reiterated. Dalit children face discrimination at schools. Their objective conditions force them to drop out of school. Many speakers felt that without education, the next generation too would be trapped into the same inequitable social world that their parents inhabit. Lack of electricity in villages and alcoholism among men were problems which found mention.

The mode of transformation in demonstrably unequal societies is the political organization of socially oppressed groups to assert their purportedly guaranteed equal rights. Right comes alive when claimed, and it can only be claimed when those who are guaranteed the right, but deprived of it, organize and struggle to attain it. Mere organization does not secure it permanently. Neither do stray acts of militancy, successful or otherwise, necessarily enable the transformation of a backward social reality. The organized force needs to assert itself constantly until such time as the right is secured permanently. Only then can the legal framework itself be said to be reasonably democratic, and, most importantly, only then can the judiciary, especially the lower levels, be forced to think and act differently.

Instances of such assertions were recounted at the convention in colourful and pithy terms, far removed from the customs and protocols of genteel society. Accounts were given of women organizing themselves to ensure that policemen do not harass them, or even enter their village. Such organizing also ensured that land legally theirs, but coveted by upper caste groups, was not lost. Most importantly there was a pride in being hardy, in not being pampered, in being able to withstand great hardships, in having a new identity, other than the caste-designated identity, in the strength and courage to sustain and endure attritive battles. It was a feeling of "we do not have the strength to bear any more, we only have the strength to fight". A poignant account of the struggle of the women of Kitmai village, in the Fatehpur district of Uttar Pradesh, was given. Rape of women in this predominantly

dalit village was a routine matter. Collective action through the organization of a Mahila Samhiti led to an improvement in the condition of women in the village.

The convention brought to the fore the need to look at the different forms of exploitation that take place and then to link these up so that a practicable emancipatory strategy can be devised. What also became obvious was the prevailing and worrying disjuncture between the more avant garde practices of the social sciences and the grim Indian political reality that awaits transformation. That the social sciences, such as they are, can exist, even flourish, in such a context is itself a telling statement.

Published in Economic and Political Weekly, February 6, 1999, pp. 323–24.

Dalit Women's Cry for Liberation

"My Rights are Rising Like the Sun, Will You Deny This Sunrise?"

PRANJALI BANDHU

Dalit is Dignified

There is a long history of anti-caste struggle and ethos in the ancient classical tradition and the popular cultural tradition of the "Untouchables" in India. Caustic anti-Brahmin proverbs, songs and contemporary Dalit writing question Brahminical supremacy and assert human equality.

Blood suckers three on earth there be,
The bug, the Brahmin and the flea.

O God, let me not be reborn as a Brahmin priest,
Who is always begging and is never satisfied.

The God Pottan Teyyam of the Pulayas of Malabar condemns caste and preaches a religion of common human values in a dance song which begins with caste men asking Pottan to get out of their path:

"Give way, give way, Chinna Pulaya."
But out came the retort:
"I have my child on my arm
And pot of toddy on my head.
On one side of the road,
You see the thorn,
On the other side, you see the thicket.
How can then we give way?
When Chovar rides an elephant,
We ride a buffalo.
If so, why quarrel over caste?"

When your body or ours is hurt,
It is human blood that gushes out.
The blood is the same,
Why then quarrel over caste?"

(Translated by Abraham Ayroorkuzhiel)

The song continues in this vein and demolishes all arguments for upper caste supremacy.

The term "Dalit" was coined by Dr. Ambedkar for the untouchable population of India. Meaning the "oppressed" or "down-trodden" it implies the need to revolt against oppression. The word (in contrast to Gandhi's "Harijan" and the Government of India's "Scheduled Caste") is a symbol of assertive pride and resistance to the linked oppressions of caste and class.

Historical evidence points to the fact that Dalits, along with the so-called Scheduled Tribes, were the original inhabitants of this country. Dalits, comprising 15 per cent of the population, are a marginalised social group in almost every village and town. The roots of their absence of power lie in ancient racial and ethnic conflicts, tribal prejudices, military defeat, loss of territory and eventual enslavement to the victorious group.

Today, their deprivation is reflected mainly in the form of absence of material resources like land, education and jobs. Socio-economic crisis in post-1947 India, due to the developmental path adopted, have sharpened caste-based conflicts and have led to an escalation of violence and atrocities committed by other castes against the Dalits. The officially admitted number of incidences of atrocities against the Dalits till 1992 is 18,014 (*Times of India*, May 24, 1993). But this figure is far from true as even where the police have registered cases they have done so under the Indian Penal Code provisions, instead of registering the crime under the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 (PAA), or under the Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCRA) 1976.

A 'Public Hearing on Atrocities against Dalits with Specific Reference to Dalit Women', organized in March 1994 by Women's Voice, Bangalore, and the Asian Women's Human Rights Council, Manila, showed through the testimonies and evidence presented there, that the major offences against the Dalits have been committed by the police themselves in violation of law, or they

have colluded through indifference and inaction. The atrocities follow a particular pattern of burning homes and fields, murder, torture and beating, inhuman treatment and deaths under lock-up and custody, molestation, beating and rape of women and minor girls. These occur in spite of constitutional guarantees abolishing untouchability. Victims of bonded labour, child labour and prostitution come largely from the Dalit communities.

The People's Verdict after the Public Hearing declared that this state of affairs is due to a systemic flaw in the Constitution itself, which does not provide for a dynamic programme of positive action to raise the level of Dalits to the rest of the people of India. The Verdict charges the Indian state with gross and systematic violence against the Dalits, a pattern of repression which clearly fits into the definition of genocide—a crime against humanity.

Dalit women—downtrodden among the downtrodden

"Dalit women are the 'Dalits among Dalits' because they are thrice alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender," says Ruth Manorama of Women's Voice. Many studies have documented in measurable and objective terms that Dalit women are in a worse-off position than Dalit men or non-Dalit women in terms of sex ration, wages, employment, occupation and assets, education, health, social mobility and political participation. A study by Dr Godwin Shiri, Senior Staff at the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRC), Bangalore, documenting the conditions of Dalit Christian women in Bellary district of North Karnataka and Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh, can be taken as symptomatic.

His findings include the following observations: the sex ratio favours the men due to the women's harder living and working conditions. There is discrimination in daily wages even when the women work the same length of time and equally hard. Men doing agriculture coolie labour in Bellary district receive Rs 9–12 per day; for the same work women receive Rs 5–8. There is large disparity in the literacy rate due to widespread prejudice against women's education. The practice of dowry and the fact that after marriage they will go away, and anyway have to work mainly in the kitchen, induces many parents not to invest their meagre

earnings in their daughters' education. Casteism in the schools is also a deterrent. Early marriage between the ages of 14 and 16 prevails due to the girl's vulnerability to sexual oppression by upper caste men, or the fear of an inter-caste or inter-community marriage. If an older son is being married it is economical to marry off a much younger daughter at the same time. Caste, class and gender factors interlock for oppression in most cases.

Women's health is very much affected by too early and too many pregnancies in these famine and poverty stricken areas. If birth control is practised at all, 91 per cent of the cases are tubectomies performed on the women who have to carry the burden of family planning. There are more single women and more number of widows compared to single men and widowers. Widowers' remarriage is sanctioned and common. In an overall situation wherein Dalits are prone to ailments in general, women suffer from more serious and more varied kinds of sicknesses. The liberalization policy and structural adjustment programme of the government will worsen the Dalit women's condition in terms of unemployment, underemployment and casualisation of labour.

The Dalit movement claims that Dalit women enjoy greater liberaty when compared to other women. The socio-cultural patterns and severe deprivation faced by the community as a whole certainly makes for a more balanced and equal relationship between Dalit men and women. However, the percolation into and internalization of the male superiority ideology in the community leads to varied discriminations. Wife beating, harassment and desertion prevail and women are excluded from the political decision-making processes.

A look at the Dalit movement shows that the men are almost exclusively in leadership positions, though women participate actively. The agendas of the movement, like the fight for land (but not for entitlement for women), for minimum wages (but not equal wages) expose the male biases. Though the men Dalit writers, who predominate in comparison to women, have shown concern for the plight of their women, assertions of identity very often become male-specific and defined. Dalit women are beginning to question these patriarchal values openly.

Dalit women and the women's movement

Dalit women are simultaneously questioning the two decades old "autonomous" women's movement. They charge that it is dominated by upper caste women, who have so far put their own priorities in the forefront, and have failed to address the issues of Dalit women. Dalit women's issues are clubbed under the caption of women's issues and discussed in general terms—like women in higher education unemployment pattern, rape and atrocities against women, man-woman relationship and so on. Dalit women have not been integrated into this analysis and focussed. Government documents (like the recent Draft Country Paper for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, September 1995) also glaringly manifest this lacuna.

Women's movements are seen as those that question the inequality between genders and want to correct this imbalance by decision-making solely by women in the women's movement. Following such a perspective the struggles of Dalit women against untouchability, upper caste atrocities, land alienation and low wages are not looked upon as being strictly within the purview of the women's movement. Some activists and organizations are questioning such an approach.

Annie Namala from Dalit Action Research Centre, Chittoor, is of the view that Dalit women's struggles find their place more naturally within the Dalit movement. They have greater possibilities through this movement by taking up a more independent role within and ensuring that the gender issue is addressed. However, gender bias and oppression exist in the whole of society. From an identifiable, strong position within the Dalit movement, the Dalit women should extend a hand and cooperate with the women's movement.

The women's movement needs to take up the cause of Dalit women and question all aspects of caste, class and gender if it is really to work towards a society based on equality and justice, she further asserts. Upper caste women also need liberation from caste structures because it is a crucial factor operating behind the control of their fertility and sexuality and the evil of dowry.

There is a move among Dalit women's organizations to form a National Federation of Dalit Women and challenge the existing

premises of the women's movement and the government's declarations of women's equality. This Federation plans to present a Status Paper on Dalit Women at the World Conference on Women in Beijing in September as well as hold an International Seminar on Dalit Women. They want to focus on their issues from the human rights point of view, of being victims of racism/apartheid and genocide as well as on their economic marginalisation due to the new economic policies of the government under the World Bank/IMF aegis. They would like to realize Dr Ambedkar's dictum: "Many people like to be our bosses, we don't anymore like to be their slaves."

Published in Mainstream, August 19, 1995.

2 Voice, Literature

Pan on Fire

Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Stories

SUMITRA BHAVE

Sangeeta

She is about thirty. Dark, large-boned, not very tall, slim, with neat and prominent features, shining black eyes, and an expressive countenance. She speaks earnestly, moves quickly, walks with her head held high. There is altogether a neatness about her, an economy of effort and movement: her clothes and her house reflect this tidiness.

She lives in a small room in a tenement house, in a slum. What little money she can spare for the house has been used well to make it pleasant and comfortable. A cupboard on the wall holds pots and pans, tins and boxes of provisions, a few plates and glasses and a flower pot too. There is a money plant in a bottle on the window-sill. The statues of Ambedkar and the Buddha adorn one wall, another sports a picture of a film star clipped from an old calendar. Under the picture stands a bed and there is a table in another corner. The floor is earth, plastered over and smoothed with cow-dung paste.

Sangeeta loves to offer her hospitality to guests. She will always offer tea or sweets and even insist that you stay for lunch. She quickly establishes rapport with people. She tries her best not to let you see the strains of her daily life. She will tell a joke, laugh at something you say, mimic someone—she is a born actress—and set a lighter tone immediately if things get a bit grim. She may have learnt this skill through her work with the political activists of her community. She began her narrative with her reminiscences of her parents.

Glaring inconsistencies and improbabilities exist in this narrative, quite apparent to an Indian, especially from this part of the country. These cast serious doubts on the veracity of the account, but according to our stated policy we present it as it is.

My mother was the daughter of the milk-man who delivered milk everyday to my father. My mother's people are from the coast and my father had no idea that they belong to the Mahar caste. They had a big dairy business, so my father thought they were Marathas. He didn't know till he died, that my mother was a Mahar; she never told him.

My father belonged to a priestly class. My father's father used to tell fortunes. He was an astrologer, and he made a lot of fuss over pollution and ritual purity. Shankar was his family's ancestral god. He used to officiate at the Shankar temple behind his house, and he used to go to the *swami's mutth*. In olden days, only the Brahmins were allowed to enter there, and that too, not just any old Brahmins but only the very senior, and holy ones. My father was one of those. And his father was one of the priests at the *samadhi* of the *swami* in our town. At the religious places the Brahmins were asked how many Vedas and how many full moons each family had and the more of these, the more senior you were considered to be. My father's family had 12 Vedas and 15 full moons.

My grandfather was an expert in Ayurvedic medicine and he also used to give 'magical strings' to tie around the arms of sick children or write some holy words on a copper leaf, and fold it inside a receptacle, and string that through a black thread, and put it around the neck of a child that had got the fits. If a woman in her menses touches a child, it gets such fits. It cries all the time and behaves peculiarly. My grandfather used to give these sorts of 'charms' for the children. He had such 'charms' for all sorts of sicknesses. The words he used to write on these charms were written down in his diary. Our family still has it.

My father was in the railways when he got married but he gave it up to become a truck driver, but when his father died, he gave that up too and took up the work of making the charms and the holy threads and so on. For that work, he used to go to his father's house in the other part of the town. If we went to see him there,

his mother didn't let us in. We had to talk to him through the window and he used to pass the candy-money to us through the bars.

It seems from Sangeeta's narrative that both the families were thoroughly displeased over this intercaste marriage and even the children suffered the consequences.

My father did not tell his parents about his marriage for a long time, but my mother's parents knew about it and they also knew the house where my parents lived. Once or twice my mother's father came to the house and beat my mother up because she had married a Brahmin. When my father got to know of this he forbade his father-in-law to do this. He said, "She is my wife now; you have no right over her any more." Then some time later, my father bought his own house and did not let any of the relatives know where they were. He stopped going to see his mother.

Even I didn't know for a long time what my mother's caste was. One day, I went to my uncle's—mother's brother's—wedding and saw that it was celebrated in the Buddhist way. I asked my mother why they did that and she said that it was because they were Mahars. She told me not to tell anyone, not even my father. That's how my older brother and I got to know her caste but the younger ones still don't know.

Even though my mother is not a Brahmin, people used to call her for *puja*. Mostly everyone thought she was a Maratha milkman's daughter. My father's mother thought so too. My father was very pious but my mother didn't do any worshipping or *puja* or anything like that. As far as my grandmother is concerned, my mother still can't do anything right, and so she doesn't taken any notice of us at all. My uncle—my father's brother—does my grandfather's work now and he is quite polite, asks us in and looks after us, but not my grandmother. She has a big house and lots of gold ornaments and pots and pans but she lives there all by herself. There have even been a few thefts there—breaking and entering and so on. My grandmother has nothing to do with us. When my grandfather died, she had no money at all. And it was my mother who came to the rescue and performed all the necessary rites and arranged the cremation. From that time my grandmother knew that my mother could be counted on to help in difficulties. Even

now my mother sends her a *sari* and grain for the year, and looks after her when she is sick. But my grandmother will not eat at our place unless she absolutely has to, nor allow us at her place. She has now lost the sight of one eye. My father condemned her in strong terms till the day he died.

Many of Sangeeta's childhood memories concern her brothers and sisters. She is the eldest and has helped her mother bring them up and run the household; hence her air of confidence, freedom and responsibility.

When I was little my elder brother stayed with my mother's people. The next baby was due almost right after him and so he was sent there. For a long time I did not even know that he was my brother. I thought he was my aunt's son or something. But then he came to live with us when he was in the seventh grade and I came to know he was my brother! He was very indulged and spoiled then, but once he came back, I really loved him. We were very close. In those days, you got a pencil for five paise. We used to buy one and share it half and half. We would walk everywhere hand in hand. When he came to live with us, he began to help in the house. He would bring the mutton, grind the spices, do the shopping, fill the water, and I used to feel good that my brother was never ashamed of doing housework.

All of us children were loved and disciplined at the same time. There was never any difference in the treatment meted out to boys and girls. My mother never told us girls to do something because we were girls.

Since my brother went to live with my mother's people, I was the oldest and it was my job to care for the younger ones. I have two younger sisters and then the youngest is a boy again. I remember my mother was often in poor health when I was little and so I used to help every way I could. I mean no one told me to do anything but since there was nobody to do the work, I did it, myself.

I was a proper tomboy then. I used to play with the boys: playing marbles, flying kites, climbing trees and all that. But my mother only had to call "Sangeeta!" and I'd drop whatever I was doing and run to her, do whatever she wanted and then return to my playing.

I liked housework too. If my mother went out somewhere, I'd sit at home and wash all the pots and pans (quite unnecessarily). We were told not to go anywhere, leaving the house empty.

I used to look after the young ones and get along with them fine, but I was a bit of a bully too. If my mother brought *pedhas* I would divide them up among us and, as the little ones clamoured around me, saying "*Tai Tai*" (big sister) I'd say, "Now, I'm not going to take you anywhere in the evening!" and they'd have to offer me a bribe of half a *pedha* to make me relent. When my father came home in the evening he would give us all five to ten paise and we would bring something to eat. Whatever was brought for us was kept in a box and he would tell me, "*Tai*, I've kept it over here," and I'd be the first to eat it up and give only crumbs to the little ones. Oh, I was always the first at everything! But still we were all very fond of one another.

My mother was very strict and we all knew it. So any time she got after one of us, we'd all set up a howling and she'd have to give up disciplining that one! We were smart all right. But she was very strict and I was scared of her. She would even tie up my hands and feet and hang me from the wall-hook. And the beatings I've had! Not an ordinary whack or two—she used to beat me up with the rolling pin. Once she even broke my leg by throwing a heavy brass pot at me. And did I bleed! The blood would have filled that pot! I tell you sometimes I wondered if she were my stepmother! I bore all the beatings she gave me. I never said a word, but if someone else so much as raised a hand, I'd attack like a tigress.

Once we—my brother and I—got stuck somewhere because of the rain and we were very late reaching home. The moment we got home, my mother made us take off all our clothes, and stand naked in the balcony. And once she locked up my brother because he clambered up some trees to steal raw mangoes. And all we had to do was say "movies" and she'd beat us up! Once she had given money to the younger ones to see *Andaz*. When they showed me the money, I danced for joy and went along with them. The moment we got home, she caught hold of me and beat me black and blue. From that time, I never went to a movie. I even bought the tickets for her but I never went myself. Not even when she

asked me to. I used to tell my father whenever she beat me up and he too used to tell me that she was my young stepmother. In spite of that, whenever she fell ill I would pray earnestly to God to make her better quickly—I didn't like her but I still prayed like that.

I was my father's favourite, right from the beginning. He used to call me "puppy". He always felt that I could have really helped him if I were a boy. He was a marvellous man. He put up with all my mother's tirades. He used to do all the shopping for her. She would work only at home at first but, later on, as her responsibilities increased, she took on more work. My father was my favourite person in the family. When he drove the truck he would call me: "Bye, Puppy!" and then drive off. And he honked the horn when he came back and I immediately felt cheered that he was back and so my mother couldn't beat me up. I used to run to him and complain about her. I never complained about work, only about her.

My father's indulgence and encouragement as well as my mother's strictness combined to make us good children. She taught me not to waste time, to look after the young ones, to study hard—it was all for my good.

Sangeeta spoke about the first few days after her marriage with frankness and humour. The husband was from out of town, they only had one room for everybody, and the romanticized 'first night' and, many more after that, were nothing short of a farce.

The 'first night' after the wedding is called 'eating the needles'. Five married and unwidowed ladies come and make the bride sit on a small wooden platform. Her husband's sister makes a design of chalk powder around her and the other ladies give her a present of a coconut, betel nut, betel leaf and a few grains of rice. She is made to wear a new *sari* and blouse, flowers in her hair and sent to her husband's bed with a plate of sweets and a glass of water. I can tell you I felt very shy. I was scared of my husband. Also because the house was full of guests, nothing happened for the first week. I did all the housework and saw to the guests' comfort.

Then, one day in the afternoon, they had all gone out and in rushes my husband, catches hold of me, and there I was—a wife in no time at all! I was scared and I was disgusted. Never before

had I shown my body to anyone like that and no one had ever told me what happens between husband and wife. I can laugh now but not then! And then all the guests came back and my sister-in-law began the preparations for the 'first night'. I told her it was all over and she said, "Well shut up and don't tell anyone else!" So from that day on, it happened everyday.

When my husband told me what we had to do, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. And my goodness! When I first saw his penis! I burst out laughing. How was that huge thing going to enter me! Before my marriage, I used to sleep like the dead. But now my husband went on through the night, touching me and poking me. I told him sharply not to, but he'd say, "Shu! My parents will hear!" and go right on. You see it was first a tiny room with one cot in it. We slept on the cot and right next to it, on the floor slept my father and mother-in-law. There was a sort of a thin curtain between, made up of an old *sari*, but what use was that? You could see everything through it and of course everyone could certainly hear everything. And that cot! It was a steel sheet on four wooden blocks and made a racket at the slightest move!

You should have heard my mother-in-law. "Oh, they won't let me sleep and make a racket all night long and that cot's gonna break one day!" and on and on. Even my father-in-law said things like that to his friends. My mother-in-law rolled *beedis* at home at night. She kept the light on till well past midnight so my husband used to get mad and ask her to put out the light and she used to grumble to friends that the new couple wouldn't even let her work any more. And, on top of that, she used to collect all her friends and sit right outside the door. Now, isn't that silly? But these people of ours don't think anything of that.

I was more eager to sleep, but my husband was something else! And he wanted to do everything—take my clothes off one by one and all that sort of thing. I'd say, "Come on, just raise my *sari* and be done with it," but no! I can understand it now but then it seemed only an impediment to my sleep. Then I used to run away to my mother in order to be able to sleep in peace, but he used to write a million letters. Then I told my mother to buy me a mosquito-net at least, so she did and things were a little better.

At times he used to get fed up waiting for his mother to put off the light and begin and then when he had finished, I was in a hurry to run and wash myself because I felt soiled. So we'd go out to the toilet in plain sight of all the people sitting in front of the doorway taking the air and everyone would know everything. My mother-in-law said to me one day not to rush out like that but wait in bed but I really felt awful and dirty and had to wash before I could sleep.

I'll tell you what happened one day. We had finished lovemaking and, of course, he had insisted on taking off my clothes. I just closed my eyes a bit, thinking I'd get dressed in a minute, but I fell asleep. Some time later, he got up to go to the toilet and missed the step and fell down. I could hear everything. A lot of people, commotion, my mother-in-law shouting, "What kind of sleep is that? Her husband's fallen down and hurt and she's still sleeping! She doesn't care if he's dead, she won't get up." I thought she was going to come to beat me up. So I quickly got up and wrapped the *sari* around me anyhow and went out, but I never heard the end of it! Of course my husband knew the real reason I didn't come sooner and he didn't say a word when I asked him if I was supposed to come out naked!

All the people who live in small, crowded one-room tenements have this problem. Some rooms have two-three couples in them. Then what can they do? At first they are ashamed, but then everyone learns to ignore everyone else and do it with their eyes and ears closed. At first the others resent it, don't like to be woken up in the middle of the night by others' lovemaking but everyone is forced to be shameless through need. People can hear, the children get up and cry, the older people can't get to sleep. No one has privacy, no one has peace and quiet in such places.

Chhaya

This neighbourhood is all Buddha and Maratha. They all get married in their villages. I have seen only one Maratha wedding so far. They hold a length of cloth between the bride and the groom and then the priest says something and then they remove the cloth and the bride and the groom garland each other. That's

all I could see. It was raining and there was a big crowd of folk from both sides. Among us we have the Bauddha ceremony, at the end of which both the groom and the bride have to take oaths. The woman says, I'll listen to everyone at the new home, I will behave well, do all the work in the house, I will respect my man and the man says, I will treat my wife well and work and support her and so on. All these oaths and who keeps them? Nothing good ever comes of all that. At least not among us! Always fights. If both understood each other, behaved considerately, things would go well but who thinks of all that! (Laughs). And I tell you, the women must not be made to take that oath—there's no one here that just sits at home doing housework. They all work outside as well, may be sewing sacks or in the factories; they too earn money.

My uncle marries people. First the couple stands in front of Babasaheb's picture, and says five or six prayers, then they hold hands and then they are sprinkled with water or a thread is tied around them, then the bride puts the *mangalsutra* around her neck and they garland each other. At the end they take those oaths I told you about. My wedding will be like that. My uncle's was like that too. Both wore white clothes and my uncle refused to have turmeric paste smeared on him. They had the wedding at this wife's place—not in the temple. They had erected a pavilion outside her house and Tukaram Gondhale married them. And after the wedding they wore the new wedding *sari* and the suit. That's all. They said all the prayers and all that.

Mangala

Mangala's memories of this time in her life are of hunger and want. Even in telling them her voice faltered and eyes filled up. What her mother and sister brought home was nowhere near enough and often they had to put out the fire in their bellies with just a glass of water. Mangala's heart was heavy when she told us all this and full of sorrow for her mother's lot.

We really had a tough time when I was in the fifth grade. The money that came into the house was not enough to feed us and when my mother tried to borrow some, people would say, "Why don't you work and earn?" We felt very bad. Even I worked for a while in a marriage hall at six rupees a day. Sometimes, I helped

in rolling the *beedis*, making hooks and eyes on the clothes the tailors made.

Then I went to the village, to my uncle's place, and gave up school. There were even two or three proposals of marriage for me but the boy's folk were asking far too much, and my mother said, "My girl will marry a poor beggar but not such greedy blood-suckers." I tell you she said this even when we were dirt poor ourselves.

Then the lady, in whose house my mother used to work at washing clothes and mopping floors, mislaid some ornaments, a watch, or something, and suspected my mother, so my mother said, "You come home and look at everything I've got and see if you find your watch." But then, my mother gave up that work. Later on, that lady found whatever it was she had lost and came and apologized but my mother would not go back. So we had even less money coming in.

We sold pots and pans and plates and made do on tea and, at times, water. Finally, there was nothing. We had some red chilli powder and salt so we ate that for four days. We were all at our last ounce of strength; my little brother was dying for want of milk. We could not sleep. I looked at my mother and I thought she was at death's door. So, finally, I ran out and called the neighbours. They came and said, "Why didn't you call us sooner? We were calling you yesterday but no one answered." And they gave us tea. I asked my mother, "Shall I ask for some bread? Please?" And she said, weeping, "Yes." I asked for some bread and the neighbours gave us bread and we ate that with the tea. But what were we going to do the next day? At last, some days later, my mother got some work in a plastic factory and my sister got some housework to do in some lady's house and we had a better time.

But one day she got late for work and began to run and stumbled and fell and fainted. A man in the street picked her up and brought her home. Right away, our people began to talk about her and say that she was up to no good, talking to strangers and so on. So she was kept at home for a long time and then sent to my uncle's in the village. She stayed there for four or five years, helping in the housework, cooking and so on. When she came back I was in Bombay, at my grandmother's and, my mother had made the

acquaintance of my future brother-in-law, *Daji*. My mother and my sister have told me the whole story often in great detail, that is how I know.

In her circumscribed life, Mangala has closely known only two men—her father and her sister's husband, Daji. We were surprised to hear the great wealth of detail with which she embellished this Daji story—almost as though she had witnessed every incident.

You know what happened first? A cousin of ours told my sister that she had found a nice man for herself. So my sister was pleased for her. One day, the girl brought this man to our house. That man was *Daji*. At that time, our aunt, my mother's sister, was also there. She asked my sister who this man was and my sister told her. Then my aunt began to talk to him and it turned out that he knew my uncle. When he went away his friend told him that my sister was a good girl but his fiancée was a bit too much. *Daji* thought so too, gave up all thought of marrying the cousin. In the meantime, my aunt had got after him. I mean my aunt was married but she is like that—always off with a new man. They began to go everywhere together; movies, restaurants. He bought her *sarees* and presents. But everything on the sly.

By the time my mother found out, it was too late and my sister was already married to him. Even at that time, we were pretty hard up. *Daji* came and told my mother that he would eat in our house and bring us all the provisions. She only had to buy the vegetables. My mother thought this was a good deal and all of us would at least eat well and so she agreed. So, he began to come home every day and, finally, after some time asked for my sister in marriage and my mother thought: "Why not? At least I know the man." She agreed and my sister got married to him.

At the time of the marriage, he made gold ornaments for my sister and he behaved well for about six months after the wedding. That was because he had had a fight with my aunt over her going out with other men. She had a lot of men and he saw her once, laughing and chatting with someone, and he said to her: "Is this the way to behave when I spend so much money on you?" And his friends began to laugh at him for going with a twinklétöes, so finally he caught hold of her and he said, "Why have you betrayed me like this? I showed you movies and took you out to eat and

bought you *sarees* and you do this to me!" And he beat her up with a cycle chain. Finally she said, "O.K., let's part then; but let's go to a movie for the last time together." And he took her to a movie and he said, "You've been running around with me all this time, now what will people say if you leave me? You will ruin yourself." So she said, "Never fear! I'll find someone else. I'm not ruined yet!" And he broke off with her and got married to my sister.

Then, some months after the marriage, my aunt came to stay with us and the whole thing began again. We have only this tiny room so when we have guests we borrow a room from a neighbour for the guests to sleep and that neighbour woman came and said to my mother, "Is this the way things are done among you? Do aunts-in-law sleep with their niece's husband?" And mother said, "My God! What are you saying?" And the woman said, "Well, I've seen it with my own eyes in my room," and she showed the couple to my mother. My mother was shocked and shattered and vowed she'd not let my sister find out. She said she'd kill her first. *Daji* then went into his act and swore by all the gods and by all our lives, and so on, that he'd never do such a thing again and my mother believed him. She also told my uncle and he got mad and came after *Daji* and *Daji* swore the same oaths to him as well. By this time my sister found out and gave up eating and threatened suicide. So he fell at her feet and swore by her head that he'd never do such a thing again.

Of course, it was all hogwash and his affair with my aunt was going on as before. Soon he stopped all pretence and became quite shameless. All our relatives came to know about it. They began to ask: "Oh, that man, who runs around with your aunt, he's your sister's husband, *Daji*, isn't he?" My aunt used to come and stay with us and make my mother work like a slave. When my sister was going to have her first baby, these two used to disappear around 7.00, 7.30 and return by 12.00 or, even later, at night. My sister didn't eat and she had, of course, taken the whole thing to heart. So she became quite ill. Began to discharge some white stuff and the doctor could find no sign of life in the baby so she had to be taken to hospital. The doctor said the chances of saving both mother and child were remote.

My mother gave up all hope. She was running around all alone, getting the medicines, talking to the doctor, trying to help my sister. There was no trace of *Daji*, of course. Finally, she came home and he happened to be there so she asked for money and he, reluctantly, gave a couple of ten rupee notes, so she ran back to get the medicines and the doctor said my sister would have to be operated upon and her husband's consent was needed. My mother didn't know where to go looking for him and said she'd put her thumb impression on the form. My sister was about to be taken into the operation theatre, but just then, the doctor could move the baby and pull it out and it was dead, and the operation was not needed. By this time, my uncle and *Daji* also had come there and they took the poor dead baby from the hospital to do whatever was necessary—didn't even take it home for the proper ceremonies. Then my sister was brought home. She was almost dead.

Ashoka

The Buddhist monk doesn't come to any of our celebrations or programmes unless specially invited. He had come for my wedding. But, otherwise, he comes only when we ask him to. My father mostly performs all the necessary rituals. Of course, the monk sometimes comes to give sermons. After my wedding an aged monk had come from Marathwada. He saw that the coconut in the auspicious garland tied to the doorway for the occasion was a bit low and everyone had to bend in order to enter. He said, "This is how one gets into the habit of bending before the others. Take that coconut off!"

There are 'rights' and four '*paths*' in our religion. I cannot recite all of them now but I have read them all and have tried to follow them in my life. One of the 'rights' is the Right Way of Thinking, and another is the Right Way of Behaviour. In our religion there are no separate rules and regulations of behaviour for men and women.

I have always seen and emulated my parents' behaviour. They told me a lot of stories which impressed good principles on my mind. I thought of my mother as my ideal. We had no near relatives but some of my father's friends also told us a lot of interesting

things. Later on I read a lot of books. I read a big book of *Jataka Katha* in which the tenets and principles of Buddhism are explained through stories.

As a child and a young girl I hid my caste. In the ninth grade we studied Comparative Religion and when I read about the different principles of the different religions I realized that our religion, Buddhism, incorporated all the good and important principles of all of them and slowly I stopped feeling ashamed and began to be self-confident. I was married according to the Buddhist rites. We have not yet had a naming ceremony for our girl, nor have we cut her hair because I don't know how Buddhists are supposed to perform these ceremonies.

My husband does not behave according to the religion. He drinks, talks foul language, beats me up and so sometimes I wonder if I'm really a Buddhist or just the same old Hindu! And, at times, because of him I'm ashamed to call myself a Buddhist. I don't know if our religion tells the husband and wife to be of one heart and one mind, but I feel that the wife should patiently try to achieve this, because our religion tells us to shun enmity and strife. Strife does not end strife; only friendship does. Of course this principle is found in other religions as well.

It was my parents mostly who taught me about religion. I had made up my mind not to eat meat, but our religion does say that its principles would not interfere with anyone's main food and so I ate meat in October 1982. My father was going to force me to eat it but a friend of his told me the above rule which Ambedkar had enunciated and so I ate meat willingly. All the principles in our religion are good but there are not enough good people who follow them. Now look at my father. He is a good man who tries to follow principles. No matter how wrong or bad my uncle is—and he is a drunkard and no mistake—my father always welcomes him. Or even I—I behaved badly, went against his wishes and my husband behaves against every religious principle, but my father forgives everything. But that friend of my father who persuaded me to eat meat—he doesn't believe in forgoing enmity. He says once an enemy, always an enemy! There are many more like him than there are like my father. But, on the whole, I have not seen anyone who has turned bad because of religion.

I have never been formally converted to Buddhism. Because our parents were Buddhists, we children are, too. In my religion everything is good. I will always do as much as I can in the religious sense: say the prayers, bring up my children in the faith. On the 14th of April, the whole community gathers together for Ambedkar's birthday and a lot of people break coconuts before his statue and burn incense and put ashes on their foreheads—I don't like that. I'd at the most garland the statue. But I go because everybody else is there; there's a chance to communicate.

There is one monk by the name of Sheelratna. You should see his strict dietary observance—only milk and only fruit, and only this and only that. What sort of an ideal or example can he put before the people? In the olden days the *bikshus* and *bikshunis* were simple. They wore only one garment, did not cover their heads and went barefoot everywhere walking. Near their *viharas*, there was generally a small pond and pond-lilies grew there. So sometimes in the heat they put the lily leaves on their heads. That's all. In those days the *bikshus* did not seek popularity and publicity.

My mother fasts on full-moon days. I do not agree with her or approve of her fasts. People tell you to fast in order to achieve something or the other. And generally nothing is achieved through fasting anyhow. Take a friend of mine. She could not get married. There was nothing wrong with her but her hair was a bit sparse and her eyes close together so everyone thought she was cross-eyed and no one wanted to marry her. So she went to some astrologer or the other who discovered some sort of fault with the position of Saturn or of Mars at her birth and he told her to do 16 'White Wednesdays'. That means she was supposed to wear white and eat only white things on those days. And she did it but it was no use. So my mother also fasts and we all get to eat special 'fast' food on those days which is fine. But I say you can eat it any time you want. What's the sense in fasting? So I don't fast.

From Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell their Stories, 1988, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.

On a Dalit Woman's Testimonio

M.S.S. PANDIAN

In fact, nostalgia and remembering are in some sense antithetical, since nostalgia is a forgetting merely regressive, whereas memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future.¹

Emphasizing popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history.²

The arrival of dalit literary criticism and dalit literature in Tamil, which more or less coincided with the birth centenary celebrations of Ambedkar, occasioned much anxiety and rage among the gate-keepers of the literary establishment. It was not an unpredictable moment when both the right and the left of the literary establishment joined hands in reviling this new corpus of writing which marked itself out as distinctly dalit and, through multiple and hitherto unavailable modes of interrogating and re-readings, rendered vulnerable and uncertain the received commonsense about what is sacred and profane in literature. Scurrying around for newer defences, the literary establishment labelled this new literary discourse as anarchist and divisive.³

Contestation being its lifeline dalit literary discourse could not but proliferate in the face of such hostility. After an unconventional expedition into the much-acclaimed landscape of Tamil classical literature, Raj Gowthaman returned with untold tales of other truths. If certain invocation of aesthetics had earlier

recovered this body of literature as a sign of Tamil accomplishment, Gowthaman unearthed in it sordid, demeaning representations of dalits and their cultural universe. What is more, the flipside of its high-flown moralizing and cannons of proper living was, for him, none other than a technology of inferiorising and disciplining the recalcitrant underprivileged—those who were outside the caste society, women and so on.⁴ As much as the literature of the so-called classical era, contemporary Tamil literature too could no longer find the going easy. Pudumaipithan's prose and fiction, bloodied in the new literary confrontation, could no longer circulate as unproblematic texts of rebelliousness.⁵

It is in this milieu where the certitudes of the past looked feeble, Bama's *Karukku*, perhaps the first dalit testimonial narrative in Tamil was published in 1992, to be quickly followed by a reprint in 1994.⁶ In *Karukku*, Bama describes her village, her childhood, her world of labour, education in different institutions, the annoying presence of casteism encountered in them, her Christian upbringing, her growing awareness of the play of caste among the clergy and the congregation, joining the Catholic order as a nun, and her disenchantment and parting of ways with the same. While such a synopsis of Bama's text would impoverish it is to resemble a regular autobiography, it is indeed not an autobiography. As Mark s.j. mentions in his foreword to *Karukku*, 'At the first sight it reads like a history of a village. From another angle it reads like an autobiography. From yet another angle, it reads like a brilliant novel.' In other words, Bama's is a case of willfully violating genre boundaries.

This act of violating genre boundaries is where Bama's narrative, even as it verbalizes her own life story, depletes rather effortlessly the autobiographical 'I', an outcome of bourgeois individualism, and displaces it with the collectivity of the dalit community. Her story, to put it differently, refuses to be her own but that of others too. *Karukku* achieves this through a range of textual strategies.

First of all, Bama's narrative, to a great degree, does not deal with herself, but the context of dalit life in which she grew up and acquired a certain self-awareness. Her descriptions of her childhood and the world of dalit labour, which constitute a substantial part

of her narrative, are marked for the most part by a compelling absence of herself. In *Karukku*, Bama's childhood comes to life in a series of cameos on collectivity—childhood games which *they* played and left behind at different stages of their lives, the festivities of the Christian calendar—Easter, Christmas and New Year—in which *they* partook year after year with much excitement, sharing of game meat brought to the village by men who habitually forayed into the adjacent hills accompanied by hunting dogs and so on.

Bama's account of the world of dalit labour, in the same vein journeys through a generalized but detailed description of diverse forms of arduous, underpaid and unpaid jobs that dalit men and women perform—ploughing, manuring, sowing, weeding, harvesting, digging wells, collecting firewood, baking bricks and so on. In this thick description, which interweaves righteous anger at the downgrading of exacting physical labour and simultaneous pride in the skill involved in it, Bama's own presence as a child getting bruised while collecting firewood in the forest or dehusking groundnuts for the landed Naicker families during school vacation is merely anecdotal. It is as though the autobiographical 'I' does not have an autonomous life outside the collective 'we'.⁷

This absence of 'I' gets its further affirmation in the polyphony of other voices from the dalit community which saturate *Karukku*. When Bama was eleven, she witnesses the battle-like confrontation in the local cemetery between the dalits of her village and the upper caste Saliyars, the consequent raids by policemen, dalit men escaping into safety in the forests and the hills and deaths due to police brutality. The narration of this childhood event which occupies considerable space in the book is a telling instance of how Bama's text instead of privileging her own voice, functions as a site for the criss-crossing of multiple voices from within her community.

We, as much as Bama, learn from her grandmother what the police would do to the arrested men. It is the whispers of women overheard by Bama which informs us of the fate of the dalits in the hands of the policemen, and we get a feel of dalit anger at the cowardice of the Saliyars from the words—swear words included—of Thavasi Kelavi, an old woman. And finally it is a series of

quotations from unnamed members of the village which discloses to us the mood of celebration and stock-taking when the verdict of the court goes in favour of the dalits. Bama's is thus, one among a community of voices.

At another level the strategy of erasing specificities by masking them with a veil of anonymity lifts the narrative from the local and turns it into a universal statement about oppression. The village in *Karukku* goes unnamed; those upper caste Saliyars who attacked the dalits in her childhood days go unnamed; the dalit headman, who hid himself in their house to escape the raiding policemen, goes unnamed; the village priest, an upper caste partisan, goes unnamed; the schools and the college where she studied and suffered caste oppression go unnamed; the nunnery and its residents once again steadfast believers in caste go unnamed.

To name is to exercise power. But a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity. In this case, the shroud of anonymity frees events, persons and institutions from the possibility of individuation and renders them as general. Anonymity thus becomes a mode of invoking larger solidarities. In contrast those who get named in *Karukku* are the ones who are so ordinary that they would be part of the dalit community anywhere else: Ponthan, the consummate thief who could dodge even the *ayyan-katchi padai* (the marching battalion of demons, big and small); Kaaman, the village idiot whose skill in making gruel is as good as that of any woman; Oodan, a habitual wife-beater who could tease his flute into brilliant music, and so on.

However, the very life trajectory of Bama is one of drifting away from the world of dalits. Access to modern education, salaried employment and the material comforts of the nunnery, which takes her away from the world of physical labour and struggle for livelihood, are some of the moments of this deep alienation. In narrating these events, *Karukku* is suffused with a sense of guilt, a yearning to reunite with the community, and a burning desire to share its pains and pleasures. Bama's conscious choice of spoken dalit Tamil, ungoverned by the tyranny of elaborate grammatical rules, as the medium to voice the story of her community is indeed instructive. In a spirit of defiance, it obviously challenges the authority of literacy over orality, a divide which was ratified and nourished by

Tamil Saivism or Tamil nationalism of different hues, including mainstream Dravidianism during this century.⁸ But at an equally important plane, it is an effort by Bama to break free from her proficiency in standardized written Tamil, a result of her privileged education in schools and colleges, and to lose herself in the community of dalits.

A similar quest is all too evident when Bama narrates her other moments of alienation from the dalit community. After detailing how her salaried job earned her the opportunity to indulge a bit in clothes, food and travel—all of which remained an elusive dream till then—and her new feeling of power and status, she laments about her community: 'How would they ever get these comforts?' This sense of remorse withers and gives way to a feeling of meaningful freedom only when she discards her job and the material pleasures of the Catholic order and returns to her own community. In a metaphor reminiscent of Maoist guerrillas, Bama eloquently captures this return to freedom thus: 'After fluttering like a fish thrown out of water, now I breathe freely and comfortably like a fish in water.'

While *Karukku* is anchored in the shared universe of the dalits, this universe is, for Bama, unworthy of any indiscriminate nostalgia. She, instead, looks for a future fashioned by the will of the dalits themselves. The very word *Karukku*, which she chooses as the title for her *testimonio*, signals this desire. *Karukku* is the saw-like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf. Bama has experienced the pains of beings torn by *karukku* while collecting firewood in her childhood. Then it can perform other functions as well: 'Dalits like me are fired by the desire to construct a new world of justice, equality and love. Like the double-edged *karukku* they keep the oppressors slashed.' To put it differently, *karukku* signifies both the oppressive present and the struggle against it, a metaphor which connects the present with the future.

The way in which Bama unfolds the story of her growing up with Christianity and the eventual disenchantment is yet another illustration of her search for dalit agency. In childhood it was the fear of god which dominated her religious consciousness. When she left her village to join a high school, this fear metamorphosed into an intense love. As she went to college, she was overcome

with a certain sense of indifference towards god—but for those times of difficulties when she solicited divine intervention. If she joined the Catholic order as a nun, it was inspired by an ambition to serve the dalits. Her discovery of barefaced casteism within the church and upper caste repression in the name of obedience led her to wonder, 'I don't know where the god has fled. For now, it is the priests, nuns and their relatives who claim themselves to be gods.'

Now on, she is in pursuit of a religiosity unmediated by the clergy. The hardships, insults and desertion by friends, which followed her after she left the Catholic order made her despair. In the closing pages of the book she, uncharacteristically, describes herself as vulnerable as a bird with broken wings. But this moment of vulnerability is simultaneously a moment of reunion with her community in search of a liberative religiosity. She writes, 'They have understood that they have been also created in the image of god. They have a new drive to bring back this image which has been broken and destroyed and to live in compassion and honour. I feel that this is genuine devotion.'

Given Bama's location as a woman within the dalit community, the invocation of community and agency in terms of a singular dalit identity is telling the story in part. Articulating concerns of gender even while recovering community as an embodiment of identity and agency would necessarily require complex negotiations. This is where Bama's testimonio appears inadequate.

It is not that gender does not animate *Karukku*. Bama recounts with gusto the stories of women's indomitable courage and prowess during those hard days of police raids: the story of the woman who kept the policemen away from her house by hanging margosa leaves at the door which announced the presence of small pox—in this case falsely—so that her husband could stay with her; the story of her own grandmother who could hatch and execute the ingenious plan of dressing up a man in a sari so that he could escape police vigil and attend his son's funeral. We also hear about the sexual abuses hurled at women by policemen and the unintelligibility of why men are paid more than women for the same labour. But all of these fleet through the text as if they are mere

fragments of a larger story. We are left to imagine the gender relations within the community.

Are we to take it as a sign of greater equality between genders within the dalit community? Or is it that Bama deliberately refuses us the story and holds it as a secret in the face of onslaughts on her community? Only she can tell. In making us wait, she is perhaps once again asserting her own will and that of her community.

Notes

- ¹ Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and Use of Memory' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol 16, No. 2, Winter 1991.
- ² George Yudice, 'Testimonio and Postmodernism', *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol 18, No. 3, Summer 1991.
- ³ For an account of the hostility towards dalit literary criticism and dalit literature in Tamil Nadu by the literary establishment, see V. Arasu, 'Tamil Siruppathirigai Choolalum Dalit Karuthadalam', in Ravikumar (ed.), *Dalit: Kalai-Illakiyam-Arasiyal*, Dalit Kalaivizha Kuzhu, Neyveli, 1996.
- ⁴ See, for instance, Raj Gowthaman, *Aram/Adikaaram*, Vidiyal Padippagam, Coimbatore, 1997. For a preliminary analysis of Raj Gowthaman's writings, see M.S.S. Pandian, 'Stepping Outside History? New Dalit Writings from Tamil Nadu', in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1998.
- ⁵ A. Marx, 'Pudumaippithanin Pirathigalil Dalithugal, Maravarkal, Kristhavarkal Matrum Idara Mamisa Padchinigal' in P. Krishnaswami (ed.), *Pudumaippithan Illakiya uhadam*, Kaaviya, Bangalore 1995.
- ⁶ Bama, *Karukku*, Samudaya Sinthanai Seyal Aaivu Mayyam, Madurai 1994.
- ⁷ On the essential feature of *testimonio* as of the community and not of the individuated self see Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney, 'Voices for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin America', *Latin American Perspectives* Vol 18 No. 3, Summer 1991; George Yudice, 'Testimonio and Postmodernism'; and John Baverley, 'The Margin at the Centre: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative) in Sidonic Smith and Julia Watson (ed.), *Decolonising the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1992.
- ⁸ For similar argument, see John Baverley, 'The Margin at the Centre', p. 97; and George Yudice, 'Testimonio and Postmodernism', p. 17.

Published in Seminar 471, November 1998, pp. 53–56.

The Subaltern Speaks

A review of *Viramma**

MAJID H. SIDDIQI

Even at the best of times, when the discipline of anthropology did not have a sagging morale or, as in recent times, an overdose of critical self-reflection, the process of writing an ethnobiography has been a vexed one. The subjects cannot represent themselves, they must be represented; the insightful adage has moved this last century and a half to cover, first, peasants, and then, the Orient. The ethno-cultural test itself becomes still more problematic if it is a transcription of the speaking out, the musings, and the reminiscences of a Dalit woman recorded over nearly a decade. The question 'Can the subaltern speak?' has been raised because the matter of representation, always at the back of the mind of the inquiring social scientist, has become centrestage, mired as it is in the convoluted thought processes of the academy. And now we have an answer: 'Can the subaltern speak!'

There is plenty that has been recorded from Viramma, plenty that is significant in understanding how the other nine-tenths lives. For the moment let's go with the poet and savour the delightful recounting of 'the brass tacks'—birth, copulation and death. Viramma recounts the circumstance of her own birth, as this was passed on to her.

"It was a night in the month of Markaji, a night when we stay awake fasting and actors entertain us until the early morning. The whole neighbourhood disapproved, but my mother wanted to be there, even

* *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* by Viramma, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, London: Verso, 1997, New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2000.

with her stomach sticking out like Pillaiyar. She couldn't stay long. The moon had barely risen before she went into labour. My grandmother, who was sitting next to her, hurriedly got up when she saw her breathing like an ox and gathered together all the women. . . .

Day broke. The sound of the hand bell and drum could be heard coming from Perumal's temple in the village, along with the noise of pulleys and buckets: people were taking their ritual bath. The fast had just ended . . . the men were getting ready to go the fields after staying up all night. They stopped in front of the house and seeing my father sitting near the door, his head in his hands, was all they needed to guess what sex the child was. They carried on their way, saying, 'Nadesan has had another daughter!' The women recognized the high-pitched cry of a girl and shouted good-naturedly, 'Hey! Here's another little bitch been born!'

Her childhood passed "as if I was living in the kingdom of the gods on earth". And in the early days, as well as in the later years, marriage was a ball.

"My husband didn't use to hang about too much at that point either. He came home pretty fast and stretched out next to me. I'd get up immediately to massage his legs and then he'd ask me to tell him stories. I was very happy with that, especially because I knew a good number of them and because it relaxed me: at last I was the speaker and I liked being listened to. While I told him stories, he'd pull me to him and I'd be stretched out next to him, legs against legs. I didn't feel embarrassed at all. I felt fine. My husband caressed my body with his rough hands. His movements were quite nervous, but not at all brutal. We caressed each other for a long time, a very long time. I don't know how to tell you all this, Sinnamma. At those moments, he was ready to do anything. Once, to punish him for having been so brutal at the start of our marriage, I made him lick the soles of my feet and my toes! It made me feel very good at the same time. I found out with him that the ears and the hollows behind the knees are places that give pleasure. Not only that. I looked admiringly at his little hairy balls and his sting which was thick and hard as sugarcane with its violet head. I was always very moved at those times, and I felt feelings that I had never known before. . . . In the end, we were happy, we satisfied each other."

As to death, the sheer vibrancy of Viramma's testimony on funerary rites and practices shows us how the poor and the oppressed fight off their losses.

"To tell you the truth, it's only the dead who aren't watching on these occasions! That's how it happens with us in the country. . . . People sing and dance while they're waiting for the relatives to arrive and up to the burial: the point is to finish life cheerfully. . . . As for the Brahmins! Not only is there nothing—no drums, no music. But what's more, they carry the dead on their shoulders and run with them like thieves! (Laughs.) They pick up speed leaving their houses and don't stop until they reach the cremation grounds, without making any noise. We are cheerful people and never hold any funeral without songs, without music, without laments."

A hurrah for directness, of thought and representation. So powerfully does the narrative of Viramma, a pariah woman who has suffered all the iniquities possible in a cruel agrarian social order of class and caste repression come through, that one might think that the prickly matter of interpretations from the field (and from documents) has now been settled once for all: they can represent themselves, they must not be represented. Seen in this light the careful transcription done by Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine of the ebullient folk-speak of a women agricultural labourer from Tamil Nadu should (and in itself) suffice to illuminate the cultural universe of the rural poor, and more specifically, in southern India.

But of course not all is celebratory as in the extracts just quoted from Viramma. The theme of how and with what difficulty and pain (and yet with ingenuity) a Dalit, a pariah, might yet negotiate her passage though life, runs right through this account. Particularly note-worthy is the story of this woman's view of the nature of her bondage in work to her landlord on whose fields she works as a hired agricultural labourer. Students of rural relations in colonial and independent India will recall how the vast number of peasant movements were inspired primarily by the thirst for land and in this great saga all those, be they sharecroppers with just a toe-hold in a "dwarf-tenancy" or tenants on larger holdings, who did not possess the fullest peasant property rights, longed to do so, so that they could not beat back the overbearing presence.

of their superordinate land-holder. Viramma's story, even though that of the bottom-most rung of the agrarian hierarchy, is typically representative of this process.

What is initially surprising in her story is the fact that her grandfather had actually "owned a few plots of land"; but then the advantages of this resource were no longer available and life was led as an agricultural labourer. All the while Viramma recalls how even as agricultural labourers she and her husband yearned towards being able to become self-supporting peasants:

"It's harder and harder for us to become tenants on privately owned land because they're afraid that, after a while we will take their land. You know very well that we're not like that, that people can trust us in this. But the government is for it and they encourage people who work the land to take possession of it after a few years. They say that there have been some court cases like this and that a Chettiar from Pondy lost all his land this way. That's why it's very, very difficult to get some of a landowner's land and when he rents it out, he splits it up and gives a quarter of a kani to one and an eighth to another. You understand why we poor are the Reddiar's serfs—it's to win their confidence. We haven't got any land of our own, so each one of us tries to rent a little bit of their land without middlemen and without a mortgage. They have to trust us otherwise how are we going to pull through without a scrap of land of our own?"

In these yearnings, then, and in this enervating uphill climb, perhaps lies the key to understanding why so many single sparks of this rebellion and that riot never could light the prairie fire for the vast numbers of India's toiling millions. Kancha Ilaiah may well be correct in his assertion that the Dalit social order is different from and apart from the "Hindu" social order. But whether or not the gods were shared (incidentally in Viramma's world the gods are shared with those of the upper strata of caste landholders) by the Dalit members of Indian society, their own material aspirations made them move in very much the same direction that was dear to the heart of all tillers of the land, namely, to eventually be able to have their own little plot of land.

The book carries an Afterword, "Under the Banyan Tree: Speaking from the Ground" that situates the context of this auto-

ethnography of Viramma. In the final few pages of this eminently readable book, through a sensitive and empathetic portrait of Viramma, the Racines make their point well—that the self description of Viramma as a Paraiyar is really no more than a locating of her experience in her own time. And yet, it remains very much the voice of a Dalit that is not more accepting of fate than what is true of Viramma's Dalit son who explicitly rejects the hand of fate and of the presumed cultural particularities of the *jati* group that he was born into.

For the English language readership in India this previously published book in French (in 1995) and in English (1997) has now been made available by an up-and-coming press that has a quality of excellence in its production that seems not only to rival but almost beat the best, including the longstanding, publication houses of this country.

3 History & Anthropology

The Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925–1948

S. ANANDHI

The *Suyamariathai Iyakkam* (Self Respect Movement) which was launched by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Naicker in 1926, in an effort to democratize the Tamil society, has been the theme of historical research by several non-Marxist and Marxist scholars.¹ In their writings the movement has been characterized in different ways—revivalist, pro-British, secessionist, anti-Brahmin etc.

A striking feature of the existing studies on the Self Respect Movement is their silence on its consistent struggle against women's oppression and its attempt to dismantle the ubiquitous structure of patriarchy in Tamil society. Although Marxist scholars like N. Ram and Arulalan have briefly dealt with this aspect of the movement,² a detailed systematic treatment of the same is yet to be done. This silence is significant because the question of women's emancipation was one of the central themes in the political agenda of the Self Respect Movement,³ especially during its early phase.

The present paper is a modest attempt to fill this void in the current scholarship on the Self Respect Movement which is a result of writing history from the male point of view.⁴ The paper therefore addresses itself to the question of how the movement perceived the women's question and in what manner it tried to resolve it.

Ideas of Periyar

After establishing a break with the Congress in 1924, Periyar⁵ began to articulate, rather stridently, his views on such institutions of Tamil society like religion, caste hierarchy, and patriarchy. Opposing the reformist zeal of his contemporaries like Gandhi and those of the past like Siddhar and Ramanujam,⁶ he called for a total break with the retrograde elements of the Tamil past. Addressing the South Indian Reform Conference in 1928, he said, '...I have gradually lost faith in social reform. For one who believes in radical change, self-respect, equality and progress, the alternative (to the present situation) is not mere reform; but radical reconstructive work which would *destroy the traditional structures*.'⁷

This yearning for a total change marked his position on women's question too. Within the ambience of the Self Respect Movement he was not content with taking up such conventional themes of women's emancipation like widow-remarriage and women's education which, even if successful, did not undermine the existing structure of patriarchy, but he raised questions relating to basic pillars of patriarchy, like the monogamous family and the norms of chastity prescribed for and enforced upon women. Even while advocating women's education, his attempt was to direct it against the structure of patriarchy. He noted, 'The quality of education imparted to woman till now has been one of training woman to be an efficient house-wife—by designing the curriculum to include cooking, music, tailoring etc. Thus woman's education has been an advertisement to acquire a 'qualified' husband.' He argued, women's education should have the aim of providing employment for women and thus making them economically independent.⁸

The most important idea he had advanced was about marriage and family which he identified as the key institutions sustaining patriarchy. Since marriage enabled women to be enslaved as the property of men he insisted that marriage as an institution should be abolished. Speaking in a women's meeting at Victoria Hall, Madras, in 1948 he attacked the concepts of marriage and family:

The concept of husband-wife relationship has been one of master-slave relationship. The essential philosophy of marriage has been to insist on women's slavery . . . why should human beings alone keep

such contract of one-man-one-woman relationship . . . until women are liberated from such marriages and from men, our country cannot attain independence.⁹

Despite his disapproval of marriage as an institution he approved a certain kind of marriage which transcended the traditional and socially-accepted norms for women. He opposed all ritualistic practices associated with marriages, including the tying of *tali* around the neck of the bride by the bridegroom which he treated as a symbol of women's subjection to men. He also opposed arranged marriages and advocated that men and women should choose their partners at their own free will.¹⁰

The notion of woman's chastity, which sustained monogamous family, was another subject of his criticism. In one of his pamphlets entitled *Penn Yean Adimaiyanal?* (Why did women become enslaved?), which was initially written as a series of articles in 1928, he noted: 'The imposition of 'patrivratha' qualities on women has destroyed their independence and free-thinking and made them unquestioning slaves—to men—who are supposed to demonstrate undue faith over chastity.'¹¹ He also attacked classical Tamil literary texts such as *Silapparikaram* and *Thirulcural* for preaching chastity as a necessary quality for women.¹² Instead, he suggested polyandry and divorce as solutions for women's oppression. In speeches delivered at various places in 1935 he argued, 'Divorce is a protective instrument in the hands of many oppressed women. Along with Divorce Act there should be a provision for compulsory registration of all marriages.'¹³

According to Periyar, while marriage and chastity were key patriarchal institutions, patriarchy as such was ubiquitous, pervading spheres like language, literature and gender-based socialization. In his writings about women's oppression and in his speeches at self-respect marriages he noted with contempt that the Tamil language did not have words for the male counterpart of adulteress and widow.¹⁴ He invented the neologism for widower, *Vidavan* and for male prostitute, *vibacharan* and suggested their use. He also noted that several words are used in Tamil literature and in daily life in derogation of women such as *Aanmai* (masculinity). He wrote,

Women should not forget that the word *aanmai* itself is used in derogation to women. . . . As long as *aanmai* will exist, women's slavery will only grow. It is definite that the emancipation of women will not materialize till women themselves destroy the philosophy of *aanmai*. . . .¹⁵

The Tamil language, in his opinion, was 'barbaric', as it did not have 'respectable words for women.'¹⁶ Delivering a speech at Tirupattur in 1946, Periyar strongly criticized Tamil literature for describing women's bodily features at length and ignoring their intellectual faculties. He argued that unless women oppose such a projection of their image in the literature, neither literary traditions nor their own status would change.¹⁷

Apart from attacking the institutions of patriarchy and condemning its ubiquitous nature, Periyar also underlined its relationship with the control of property.

When people were totally free without property in land, I do not think there were these slavish practices of women's oppression and compulsory marriage contracts. *When there was no concept of accumulating private property . . . there could not have been any compulsion for acquiring heir for the family—property—through child-birth.* Only when the desire for private property came into practice the concept of marriage and imprisoning women to protect the family property also came into practice. Once a woman was made the guardian of man's property, she herself became his property to produce heir for the family . . . women lost their right to worship their gods but only their husbands. The private property which has been the main reason for women's oppression has to be totally destroyed in order to achieve women's liberation.¹⁸

In the context of Periyar's view that private property with its need to have inheritors, gave rise to women's subjection in order to produce heirs for property, his advocacy of birth control assumes significance. Arguing that women should have the right to decide to have children, he differentiated his position from the other advocates of birth-control by focussing attention on women's choice: 'There is a basic difference between our insistence on birth-control and other's notion of birth-control. . . . They have only

thought of family and national welfare through birth-control. But we are only concerned about women's health and women's independence through birth-control.'¹⁹

Periyar's trenchant criticism of Hinduism was influenced by its role in legitimizing patriarchy.²⁰ While addressing a women audience, he reminded them that the *varanashrama dharma* and Hindu religion had treated them only as *dasis* (prostitutes) of gods who, in turn, tested only women's chastity and not that of men. Ridiculing bigamous gods he said, 'Sisters, you should never perform any rituals to gods who keep two wives and concubines. You must ask the god why he needs two wives and why does he need a marriage every year! How could you worship stones as gods and fall at the feet of Brahmin priests who have legitimized your slavery through religion and rituals?'²¹

Periyar's commitment to the cause of women's emancipation often led him to be critical of his own political comrades. In anguish, he noted, 'The self-proclaimed liberators of women, the Dravidian intellectuals, have kept their daughters, sisters and mothers as mere decorative pieces at home.'²² He openly condemned the Justice Party ministry, despite his general support to it, for its attitude towards women's question and its failure to effectively implement the anti-child marriage act. Periyar demanded the resignation of A.P. Patro and other Justice Party ministers from the party as they failed to enact any legislation to improve the conditions of women.²³ In his personal life too he was self-critical about his inability to practise his preaching and writings on women's liberation. Writing an emotion-laden obituary of his wife, Nagammal, in *Kudi Arasu* (14 May 1933), he noted, 'I am ashamed to state here that I had not practised even one hundredth of what I wrote and preached about women's emancipation at home with Nagammal'.

Periyar's views on women's question found practical expression in the activities of the Self Respect Movement. The movement, *inter alia*, practised self respect marriages, organized women's conferences to raise their consciousness and to highlight their problems and involved women in mass agitations.

Activities of Self Respect Movement

Marriages

One of the important activities of the Self Respect Movement which challenged the traditional Hindu marriages and introduced radical changes in them was the conducting of self respect marriages. Self respect marriages were conducted from 1928 onwards among various non-Brahmin castes. These marriages which took place even in the remote villages and were regularly reported in the newspaper of the movement, *Kudi Arasu*, included inter-caste marriages, widow-remarriages and marriages of consent.

The central aim of self respect marriages was to free the institution of marriage from Hindu rituals which emphasized monogamous familial norms and chastity for women and thus legitimized patriarchy.²⁴ Accordingly, these marriages were conducted without Brahmin priests and recitation of religious texts. More significantly they did away with the tying of the *tali*. In keeping with the rationalistic content of the Self Respect Movement, often they were arranged in times which were treated inauspicious by the Hindu calendar (*Rahu Kalam*). Some of the marriages took place at midnight,²⁵ which is generally considered to be inauspicious time. All these challenged and subverted the religious aura that entrapped the institution of marriage.

We shall give below three such marriages to show how the movement refused to treat marriages as a personal affair and converted them into spectacular political events aimed at breaking the traditional norms of patriarchy.

1. The self respect marriage between Sivagami, a young widow belonging to an orthodox Hindu family in Thanjavur district and Sami Chidambaranar, a Tamil scholar and a dedicated activist of the movement, took place in 1930. Though Sivagami had given her full consent to marry Chidambaranar, there was stubborn opposition for the marriage from both the families. This forced Periyar to shift the venue of the marriage from Kumbakonam, the town from which Sivagami hailed, to Erode, Periyar's own native town, well known for trading activities.²⁶

The marriage which was presided over by E.V.R. Nagam-

mal did not have any of the rituals of traditional Hindu marriages, including the tying of *tali*. Speaking at the marriage, Nagammal explained how *tali* and other rituals associated with Hindu marriages symbolised the slavery of women to men. The couple exchanged rings, took an oath which emphasized friendship and equality between them, and addressed each other as comrades and friends instead of the usual 'husband' and 'wife'. And, as if to highlight the political dimension of the marriage, it was arranged in the venue of the Second Self Respect Conference itself.

In the evening, to propagate the need for widow remarriages and self respect marriages, the married couple were taken out in a procession in the streets of Erode by the Self Respect Movement activists. People indeed gathered in large numbers along the route of the procession to watch the iconoclastic couple.²⁷

2. The marriage between Kamalambal and Nallasivan which took place in the same year at Nagerkoil near Kanyakumari generated lot of tension among the members of the Saliar caste who were traditional handloom weavers. It was a marriage between a widow and widower, each of them having a child from their previous marriages.²⁸ The marriage was conducted by Periyar and Nagai Kaliappan²⁹ in a cinema hall. In the course of the marriage, the bridegroom transferred Rs 5,000 worth of his property to the bride in consonance with the Self Respect Movement's ideal that women should have equal property right as men.

About 2,500 people visited the venue of the marriage to witness the unusual event. While Periyar extolled the virtues of such marriages, A. Ponnambalanar and M. Maragadavalli³⁰ sang songs of the Self Respect Movement. Pamphlets dealing with the theme of self respect marriages and the stance of the movement on man-woman relationship were distributed to the participants.

3. The self respect marriage between two activists of the movement, S. Neelavathi and Ramasubramaniam, took place at Pallathur in Ramanathapuram district in 1930. The marriage

was attended by about 2,000 male and 500 women activists of the Self Respect Movement. In addition, about 100 local people also participated in it.³¹

Interestingly, as part of the wedding, the audience were allowed and encouraged to ask questions relating to man-woman relation, marriage, women's emancipation, etc. One of the participants asked Periyar why the Self Respect Movement allowed a second marriage. Periyar's response was that marriages could only be tentative arrangements between men and women and they should not be treated as eternal. He further said that men and women should have equal right to marry anyone of their preference even after having first marriage and divorce should be permitted.³²

The above three cases which were among the several marriages reported in the pages of *Kudi Arasu* give an idea of how the Self Respect Movement politicized marriages and used them as public events to propagate their views on the women's question. That was why marriage venues were decorated with the symbols and slogans of the movement. For instance, the self respect marriage venue in a small village near Cuddalore in 1928 had welcome arches bearing slogans like 'Long Live Self Respect Movement' and 'Long Live Vaikkam Veerar.'³³ The walls inside the marriage hall were adorned with huge posters explaining the objectives and activities of the movement.

Invariably, all these marriages, whether they were held at the house of a lowly Marimuthu belonging to cobbler caste³⁴ or a political elite like W.P.A. Soundara Pandian,³⁵ were attended and addressed by activists of the movement—especially by women activists. They spoke on these occasions on themes relating to women's emancipation and demanded legislative protection of women's rights.³⁶ In an effort to popularize such marriages, Periyar personally attended most of the marriages during the early days of the movement, even if they took place in remote villages.³⁷

The Movement organized several thousand such marriages in the Tamil areas during its three decades of political career. For instance, between 1929 and 1932 about 8000 self respect

marriages were conducted.³⁸ While certain marriages viewed women's liberation as their aim there were still others which were against Brahmin domination as they dispensed with Brahmin priests and Sanskritic scriptures. An exasperated Periyar, addressing a marriage party in 1931, objected to calling every anti-priest anti-ritual marriage as self respect marriage and said that with time, one of the objectives of the movement should be to do away with marriages themselves.³⁹ Then, freeing marriages from rituals themselves was no doubt a step ahead.

Conferences

Another important aspect of the Self Respect Movement was the conferences it organized. These conferences, which were periodically organized both at the provincial and district levels were characterized by slogan-chanting processions, long speeches aimed at propagating the ideology of the movement and passing of resolutions on various political themes. The Self Respect Movement used these conferences as a regular political site to take up women's issues and to encourage women's political participation.

The first provincial Self Respect Conference was held at Chengleput, near Madras, in 1929.⁴⁰ Apart from articulating its views on themes like Simon Commission, caste oppression and religious institutions, the conference dealt specifically with 'marriage and other rituals.' It demanded that men and women should have the right over property. The Second Provincial Self Respect Conference was held in 1930 at Erode.⁴¹ Within the ambience of this Conference, two other conferences were organized: a youth conference and a women's conference. In the context of organizing separate women's conferences, one may note that Periyar passionately believed that women's emancipation would be possible only by the efforts of women. He was critical of man's advocacy of woman's emancipation: 'As of now, men's struggle for women's liberation has only strengthened women's enslavement.'⁴² The proceedings of the women's conferences, were fully conducted by women activists and it demanded, *inter alia*, compulsory education for girls upto the age of 16, effective and immediate implementation of anti-child marriage and divorce acts, equal property right

for women, implementation of Devadasi Bill to prevent young girls from being initiated as prostitutes etc.⁴³ The fact that there was a separate conference of women did not come in the way of the general conference and the youth conference taking up women's issues. The youth conference, for example, appealed that young men should come forward to marry widows and *devadasis* who were willing to marry.⁴⁴

The practice of having a separate women's conference along with every major self respect conference became a permanent feature of the movement in the subsequent years. The Second Women's Conference held at Virudunagar in 1931 increased its demands. It also argued that women should not be recruited only for professions like teaching and medicine, but should be inducted even into the army and police; and it called for powers to the local magistrates to identify those temples which encouraged *devadasi* system.⁴⁵

While special women's conferences provided an exclusive space for women activists of the Self Respect Movement to articulate themselves on women's issues, their participation in general conferences was also substantial. That is women were not 'ghettoized' within the movement. Often the much honoured role of delivering the inaugural addresses of conferences fell on the shoulders of women activists. To cite a few instances: in 1931, Indrani Balasubramanian inaugurated the Third Self Respect Conference at Virudunagar;⁴⁶ in 1932, T.S. Kunchidam inaugurated the Tanjavur District Self Respect Conference;⁴⁷ in 1933, S. Neelavathi inaugurated the Third Tanjavur District Self Respect Conference; in 1934, R. Annapurani inaugurated the Tiruchenkod Taluk Adi Dravida Conference;⁴⁸ in 1937, Meenambal Sivaraj presided over the Tinnelveli District Third Adi Dravida Conference;⁴⁹ and in 1938 the Madurai Self Respect Conference was inaugurated by Rajammal.⁵⁰ In the course of the inaugural address, these women speakers discussed the various aspects of the women's question. This participation was of Periyar's efforts to break the culture of silence which influenced the women activists of the movement: he insisted that even the most inarticulate women activists should utter at least a few words in the women's conference.⁵¹ The success of these self respect conferences in politicizing women can be

summarized in the following words of Singaravelu Chettiar:⁵²

Women who have been confined to the kitchen are speaking today from public platforms; they are debating about public issues; they are involved in social work as equals of men: the credit for facilitating all these goes to Periyar.

It is rare to find women in other movements who are as skilled in public oratory as they are in this movement. During the last fifty years, the Indian National Congress could produce only one Sarojini Naidu.

. . . What an ability women belonging to the Self Respect Movement have in organizing their own conferences—independently and with true equality. In other movements, women figure only as an adjunct to men's activities; but in our movement, they function as an independent group and involve in—the movement's—activities demonstrating equality with men.⁵³

It was the conference of the Progressive Women's Association, held in Madras in 1938 that bestowed the honorific title *Periyar* (The Great One) on E. V. Ramasamy 'for his unparalleled activism to transform the South Indian Society.'⁵⁴ This title became the short-hand for his name all through his life and after.

Some leading women activists were elected to the Central Council of the organizing committee of Tamilnadu provincial conference through the conference every year. For instance, at the Third Provincial Conference at Virudunagar in 1931, Indrani Balasubramanian was elected as council member. When the Samadharma Party conference was held at Erode in 1933, S. Neelavathi and K. Kunchidam were elected as Propaganda Secretaries to establish the Self Respect League in villages. Few other women like R. Annapurani, and Ramamirtham Ammal, were chosen as district and inter-district Samadharma propagandists.⁵⁵

The women members of the Self Respect Movement not only participated in the non-agitational programmes of the movement like conferences, but also quite actively in mass agitations. The most significant mass agitation launched by the movement during the period of our study was the anti-Hindi agitation which continued for over two years, from late 1937 to early 1940. The agitation forced the Congress ministry headed by C. Rajagopalachari to

reverse its decision to introduce Hindi as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum.

During the initial phase of the agitation, women members of the movement actively participated in processions and meetings. Women clad in sarees with the Tamil flag³⁶ printed on them and chanting anti-Hindi and pro-Tamil slogans were a distinct feature of these processions and public meetings.⁵⁷ The meetings were also addressed by women activists. For instance a huge public meeting organized at the Triplicane beach in Madras on 11 September 1938 to receive a symbolic Tamil army, which marched by foot from Trichinopoly district to Madras propagating anti-Hindi message, was addressed by not less than four women activists; Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Narayani Ammaiyar, Va.ba. Thamarai-kanni Ammaiyar, Munnagara Azhagiyar.⁵⁸ Also, the women activists organized farewell committees to see off their male comrades to prison.⁵⁹

With the agitation gaining strength over time, batches of women activists courted arrest. The first batch of five women consisting of Dr Dharmambal, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Malar Muga-thammaiyar, Pattammal and Seethammal were arrested on 14 November 1938, in Madras.⁶⁰ Wearing sarees printed with the Tamil flag and singing Bharathidasan's evocative song calling for a Tamil army to save the language, they were led in a procession from Kasi Visvanathan Temple in Pethu Nayakkan Pettai to Hindu Theological School. On the route of the procession they were stopped at various points and garlanded. For picketing the school, they were arrested and imprisoned for six weeks.⁶¹ Though the judge offered them the option of paying a fine of Rs 50 or undergoing 6 weeks imprisonment, they chose the latter.

From then onwards women activists of the movement courted arrest with different intervals, till September 1939 when the last batch of five women were arrested. In total, 73 women were arrested and jailed for their involvement in the anti-Hindi agitation. Significantly, several of them went to jail with their children; thirty two children accompanying their mothers to jail.⁶² An exasperated member of the Congress ministry, commented that women were getting arrested to get milk for their children in jail! The Madras provincial women's conference held at Vellore in

1938, demanded that the minister concerned take back his comment and offer an unconditional apology.⁶³ The Self Respect Movement's newspaper *Kudi Arasu* prominently reported the women's involvement in the agitation and published transcript of the arguments they had in the court and their photographs. And Periyar himself was arrested during the agitation on the charge of inciting women to fill the jails.

In concluding this section, we shall cite an exchange that took place between a woman activist of the Self Respect Movement, arrested for participating in the anti-Hindi agitation, and a prosecuting Inspector in a Madras Court:

Prosecuting Inspector: You are with your small children, prison is painful and your husband will suffer. If you promise you will not do similar things in future (i.e., participating in such agitations), we shall pardon you.

Women activist: . . . We are willing to bear any suffering for the progress of our language, our nation. *Our husbands have no right to interfere in this.* They are not the ones to do so.⁶⁴

Women activists and their consciousness

A case study

The Self Respect Movement, as we have seen, had provided space for the encouraged political activism among women. To explore how far the movement had succeeded in raising the consciousness of women about their own plight, one needs to construct case histories of these women activists. We shall provide below the portrait of an extraordinary woman who began her life as a *devadasi*,⁶⁵ but transformed herself, over the years, to become a front ranking participant in the Self Respect Movement.

Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyyar was born in 1883 in the Isai Vellalar caste, one of the caste from which *devadasis* were drawn. She was brought up in a *devadasi* family at the small village of Moovalur in Thanjavur district, and was initiated into the *devadasi* system at a young age. Writing in *Kudi Arasu* in 1925, she noted, 'I was born in a traditional non-*devadasi* family . . . My uncle and aunt persuaded my father to force me into prostitution, through the *devadasi* custom. They also advised not to marry me away, since I would fetch a handsome amount for the family

through the profession, given my talents in music and dance. . . . So my parents forced me into this custom. It was during this time, I deeply thought about this custom as evil and read those religious texts which advocated it. I felt that men have forced certain women into this degrading profession to pursue their indiscreet pleasures and for selfish reasons.'⁶⁶ This awareness led her to walk out of the despicable *devadasi* life and marry a musician Suyambu Pillai on her own accord. This marriage created furore in her community and resulted in her being ostracised.⁶⁷

Ramamirtham Ammaiyar began her political career in the Indian National Congress. As a Congress activist, her full energy was expended in tackling the question of women's position in Tamil society especially that of *devadasis*. In her words: 'I have been struggling for the past seven or eight years to abolish this *devadasi* custom. I have also organized a conference to reform our women and break the *devadasi* system. Without invitations, I barged into houses, where marriages were held, to advocate simple marriages and to expose the evils of *devadasi* system. I have forced women to keep the promise of discouraging their fellow women from becoming *devadasis*. Some men have been constantly campaigning against my battle against the system. . . . They are threatening . . . that they would smash my skull if I preach in marriages against the *devadasi* system.'⁶⁸

From her writings, it is not clear why she left the Congress to join the Self Respect Movement. However, it is only evident that her break with the Congress which occurred during mid-1920s was sharp and complete. In 1956, while remembering her involvement in the Self Respect Movement, she wrote, 'once Gandhi had written to me a letter appreciating my efforts towards *devadasi* abolition. I used to worship that letter. After I left the Congress, not only that letter, even Gandhi had got erased from my mind.'⁶⁹ One may note here that Ramamirtham Ammaiyar met Gandhi in 1921, during his visit to Mayuram and this meeting gave added fillip to her activism in the Congress.⁷⁰

In the course of her political career in the Self Respect Movement, she acted as a relentless political campaigner against women's slavery. As a full-time activist of the movement, she addressed various conferences of the movement and elaborated how

Hinduism and upper caste men were legitimizing women's slavery.⁷¹ She arranged and addressed several self respect marriages in different places, and one such significant marriage arranged by Ramamirtham was the widow-remarriage of Sivagami and Chidambaranar, which we have earlier described in some detail.⁷² During the anti-Hindi agitation in 1938, she propagated the anti-Hindi message through a *padayatra* from Trichi to Madras and was arrested. This *padayatra* started on 1 August 1938 from Uraiyur (Trichy), covered around 577 miles and reached Madras after 42 days. During the *padayatra* about 87 public meetings were addressed by the group.⁷³

Significantly, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar authored essays regularly in *Kudi Arasu* on the condition of women. Here one may note that Ramamirtham Ammaiyar had informal education only upto Third Standard. In 1936, she published a voluminous novel in Tamil running into 303 pages, with the title *Tasikalin Mosavalai Allathu Matipettra Mainer* (The treacherous net of the Dasis or a minor grown wise).⁷⁴ The novel, which did not follow the tradition of Tamil literary style however remained an interesting document since 'it is based on personal experiences of the authoress who after all was a professional dasi herself'.⁷⁵ It dealt with how two *devadasi* sisters who were exploited by wealthy men walked out of the profession and organized *Devadasigal Munnetra Sangam* (Federation of the Progress of Devadasis) to abolish the system. This semi-autobiographical novel carried a poignant and political preface in which she wrote,

My strong opinion is that from the ancient time the temple priests, kings and the landlords, . . . in the name of art, had encouraged particular communities to indulge in prostitution.

. . . These days more than the Kumbakonam Shastris, Satyamurthy Shastri have been making noise about preserving the Devadasi custom.

. . . Our women have been suppressed in all spheres. The legitimization of the suppression given through religion and *shastras* is evident in the manner in which women have been assigned the role of prostitutes. Through '*Potarrupu Sangam*' I propagated the anti-devadasi message for which among the Devadasi community itself there were opposition. Prominent religious heads, Devadasi agents,

reform leaders—everybody openly opposed my stand. . . . Then I decided that it is easy to oppose imperialism and Brahminism but not the Devadasi System.⁷⁶

Another fictional serial that Ramamirtham Ammaiyar wrote in *Dravida Nadu* in 1945, *Damayanthi*, also deals with the question of *devadasis*. The woman protagonist in the novel breaks out of the *devadasi* system and becomes a teacher and accuses religious texts of imposing the practice of prostitution on a section of women and questions the rationale of God's carnal desires to have women as *dasis*. Through the narrative, she also attacked untouchability and the economic exploitation of the poor by the rich.⁷⁷

An irrepressible activist and a writer, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar finally quit the Dravida Kazhagam (which was the new name the Self Respect Movement acquired in 1944) in 1949 to join the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam founded by C.N. Annadurai along with others. The reason for her quitting the movement was significant; she did not approve of and openly criticized Periyar's decision to marry a 20-year old young woman when he was sixty.⁷⁸

The tale of Ramamirtham Ammaiyar was indeed extraordinary. From being a *devadasi*, she became a foremost champion of women's cause in Tamil areas. Her commitment to the cause made her disagree with and break away from Periyar despite two decades of comradeship between them. Ramamirtham Ammaiyar does not represent an 'average' woman activist of the Self Respect Movement, but one who marked the outer limit to which a woman activist of the movement could reach out.

Women's question: two approaches

The radical content of the Self Respect Movement's approach to the women's question can be fully understood only when we compare it with other contemporary political movements. The most important political movement which was contemporary to the Self Respect Movement was, of course, the nationalist movement. For lack of space, we shall present below a synoptic view of how the nationalist movement 'resolved' the women's question, and compare it with the Self Respect Movement.

In a recent paper, Partha Chatterjee has shown that the nationalist movement resolved the women's question by reworking and

reaffirming the pre-existing patriarchal structure. The nationalists, while approving of imitating and incorporating the material culture of the west argued that adopting the west in aspects which were spiritual or anything other than the material sphere of western civilization would threaten the self-identity of the national culture itself. As an extension of this position, they located home as the site to retain the 'inner spirituality of indigenous life' and women as the agents responsible for that. It was advocated that women could meet this responsibility of preserving the spiritual core of the national culture through 'chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labour of love.' Only within this 'new patriarchy' the nationalist movement attempted all its reforms related to women. As long as women demonstrated these so-called feminine/spiritual qualities, 'they could go to school, travel in public conveyance, watch public entertainment programmes and in time even take up employment outside home.'⁷⁹

The nationalist movement mobilized women in the anti-colonial struggle—especially from 1920 onwards—only within the framework of this new patriarchy. The traditional feminine roles such as nurturing mother, obedient daughter, god-fearing chaste wife who would never defy the husband were extended to the public realm to expand women's participation outside.⁸⁰ While Abadi Banu Begam had to appear in public platforms by presenting herself as a mother by invoking her maternal nickname 'Bi Amman,'⁸¹ the Calcutta prostitutes' support to the non-cooperation movement came under fire from the nationalist intelligentsia.⁸²

In illustrating how the nationalists in the Tamil-speaking areas addressed the women's question, one may begin with the views of Thiruvi Kalyanasundaram, an activist in the national movement and a Tamil writer who enjoyed a pan-Tamil appeal despite his nationalist politics. In one of his earliest and a very popular book *Penin Perumal*⁸³ ('Women's Pride', 1927), he defined femininity as encapsulating patience, endurance, sacrifice, selflessness, beauty and love, and essentialised femininity as motherhood. According to him, all women were created to be mothers and they should be worshipped since they were the procreators as well as the transmitters of moral values to the new generation of children.

Opposing western-type of education, he suggested that girls should be provided with education that would ingrain in them traditional moral and religious values and train them in such household duties as husking and pounding of rice, tailoring etc.

Muthulakshmi Reddi, another nationalist who took up the women's cause through her activities in the Women's India Association, is much remembered for her campaign against the Devadasi system. Significantly, her opposition to the Devadasi system stemmed from her view that it stood in the way of women being chaste wives. Similarly, she held conservative views on the question of contraception—despite being a medical practitioner. She did not perceive the link between contraception and women's freedom and could only advocate—rather reluctantly—the Gandhian ideal of self-control or Brahmachariya as a means of contraception.⁸⁴

Such tendencies were even more acute in the case of other nationalist leaders such as C. Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurthy. When Muthulakshmi Reddy initiated the debate on *devadasi* abolition, Rajagopalachari, as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee refused to take up the issue for discussion.⁸⁵ Satyamurthy on the other hand, went to the extent of claiming that the *devadasis* represented national art and culture and hence the system should be retained and every *devadasi* should dedicate at least one girl to be a future *devadasi*.⁸⁶ In the same vein, he also vehemently opposed the Child-marriage Restraint Act, on the ground that it would hurt the sentiments of the Hindus.⁸⁷

Thus the nationalists failed to develop a critique of the institution of patriarchy and rather valorized patriarchy as a necessity. It is only too evident that the position of the Self Respect Movement on the women's question was in sharp contrast to that of the nationalist movement. The institutions of patriarchy like family, marriage and chastity, which were defended by the nationalist movement, were called into question by Periyar and his followers. They programmatically attempted to challenge these institutions through means like Self Respect Marriages. In short while the nationalists preserved patriarchy for mobilizing women for politics, the Self Respect Movement mobilized them to contest patriarchy.

In saying this, however, we do not imply that the spread of anti-patriarchal consciousness among the followers of the Self Respect Movement was even. It is indeed true that the movement quite clearly exhibited patriarchal consciousness in its functioning, especially during its later phase. One can cite several illustrations towards this; while in the early phase of the movement both men and women were addressed by a single word 'Thozhar' (comrade), with the formation of the Dravida Kazhagam in 1944 women activists were rechristened as 'mothers and sisters'; in the public meetings and conferences during the anti-Hindi agitation, women activists were introduced in terms of the achievements of their fathers and husbands; during the same agitation, women activists themselves likened Tamil language to a chaste woman like Kannagi and called for women's participation to protect the chastity of the Tamil language;⁸⁸ and the Dravida Kazhagam's aims and objectives stated in the Trichnopoly conference in 1945 did not have any specific reference to women's issues, but for calling them to participate in the party activities.⁸⁹

These examples go to show that, while the Self Respect Movement challenged patriarchy, it failed to create a new anti-patriarchal consciousness even among its own followers. The old regressive ideas carrying patriarchal values was dormant within the movement and asserted itself when given the opportunity to arise.

(I am grateful to Professor K.N. Panikkar, Biswamoy Pati, Padmini Swaminathan, K. Chandhu, Karunakaran, Meera V. and Anna Chandy for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.)

Notes

- ¹ The Self Respect Movement is only one phase of the Dravidian Movement and the present paper deals with only this phase. In its subsequent incarnations, it has taken the forms of Dravida Kazhagam, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. For some of the non-Marxist studies on the movement, see, Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., *The Dravidian Movement*, Bombay, 1965; Eugene Irschick, *The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929*, California, 1969; Margurite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, 1976.

For the Marxist studies, see: N. Ram, 'Dravidian Movement in its pre-independence Phases,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, Vol.

- XIV, No. 7 and 8, February 1979; P. Ramamurthy, *Ariya Mayaiya? Dravida Mayaiya? Viduthalai Porum Dravida Iyakkamum*, Madras, 1987, (in Tamil).
- ² N. Ram, *op.cit.*; Arulalam, 'The Relevance of Periyar: Caste or Class Struggle?' *The Radical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, May 1971.
- ³ A brief obituary of Periyar published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 January 1974, succinctly brings out his life-long commitment to the women's cause. 'He championed the cause of widow-remarriage, of marriages based on consent, and of women's right to divorce and abortion. Pointing out that there was no Tamil word for the male counterpart of an adultress, he fumed, '... the word adultress implies man's conception of woman as a slave, a commodity to be sold and hired.' Periyar's demand at a conference two years ago that no odium should be attached to a woman who desired a man other than her husband (which the press so avidly vulgarised), as well as Periyar's advocacy of the abolition of marriage as the only way of freeing women from enslavement, were about as radical as the views of any women liberationist.'
- ⁴ In the recent past there have been conscious attempts made by historians to write women's history by amassing different kinds of source materials to make women visible in history. For the importance of the need for writing women's history, see: Elizabeth Fox-Genovesse, 'Placing Women's History in History,' *New Left Review*, No. 133, May-June 1982.
- ⁵ E.V. Ramasamy Naicker or Periyar, a Balija Naidu from Erode, started his early life as a merchant, later as a Municipal Council Chairman of Erode, and then as a local Congress leader. In 1920 he became an ardent non-co-operationist, propagating khadi and anti-liquor activities. In 1924 he became the leader of Vaikom-Satyagraha and was twice arrested. In 1925, after his confrontation with the local Congress leaders at the Conjeevaram conference he openly criticized Congress for not showing interest in the welfare of the non-Brahmins. Finally in 1927 he left the Congress for good and began the self respect movement.
- ⁶ Siddars were iconoclastic mystic poets who represented a movement of revolt against temple worship, casteism and Brahmin priesthood. Their period was 10 to 15 A.D. Ramanujam was a socio-religious reformer of the 12th Century AD.
- ⁷ *Kudi Arasu*, 26 November 1928 (emphasis mine).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 January 1948; 21 September 1946.
- ⁹ *Viduthalai*, 11 October 1948.
- ¹⁰ Periyar had delivered numerous speeches and had written extensively in the party newspapers, expressing the above views. To cite only some instances:
Kudi Arasu, 22 December 1929, 20 September 1931, 29 September 1940, 17 November 1940, 24 November 1945; *Pagutharivu*, 7 October 1937; *Puratchi*, 17 July 1934.
- ¹¹ E.V. Ramasamy, *Pen Yean Adimaiyanal?* (Why did women become enslaved?) Erode, 1942, pp. 11-16.

- ¹² Ibid., p. 16–25.
- ¹³ *Kudi Arasu*, 16 July 1935; 26 December 1929. *Viduthalai*, 24 October 1948.
- ¹⁴ *Kudi Arasu*, 26 October 1930, 21 September 1930 and E.V. Ramasamy, *Pen Yean Adimaiyanal? op.cit.*, p. 48.
- ¹⁵ *Kudi Arasu*, 12 August 1928.
- ¹⁶ Charles Ryerson, *Regionalism and Religion, The Tamil Renaissance and Popular Hinduism*, Madras, 1988, p. 100.
- ¹⁷ *Kudi Arasu*, 21 September 1946.
- ¹⁸ *Viduthalai*, 11 October 1948 (emphasis mine).
- ¹⁹ *Kudi Arasu*, 14 December 1930, 1 March 1931 and 6 April 1931, and *Pen Yean Adimaiyanal? op.cit.*, p.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 22 December 1929.
- ²¹ Ibid., 5 July 1948.
- ²² Ibid., 21 September 1946; see also E.V. Ramasamy, *Pen Yean Adimaiyanal? op.cit.*, p. 62; E.V. Ramasamy, *Vazhkai Thunai Nalam*, Madras, 1977, p. 35.
- ²³ *Kudi Arasu*, 23 September 1928; 29 December 1929.
- ²⁴ We come across one Self Respect marriage in which the couple were Muslims. Hajurulla Mohaideen married Kameeja Begam in 1936 without any religious rites and the bride did not wear the customary purdah during the marriage. See, *Kudi Arasu*, 16 February 1936.
- ²⁵ Sami Chidambaranar, *Tamilar Thalaivar* (leader of the Tamils), Madras, 1983, pp. 118–19.
- ²⁶ Interview with Sivagami Chidambaranar, Madras, 5 April, 1989.
- ²⁷ *Kudi Arasu*, 11 May 1930.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 14 September 1930.
- ²⁹ Nagai Kalliapan was one of leading propagandists in the movement who traveled to Burma and Malaysia to propagate the movement's ideals among the overseas Tamils.
- ³⁰ A. Ponnambalanar was a prominent intellectual who wrote frequently in *Kudi Arasu*. M. Maragadavalli was the editor of the journal, *Madhar Marumanam* (widow-remarriage), published from Karaikudi during the mid 1930s.
- ³¹ S.A.K.K. Raju, *Neelavathi Ramasubramaniam Vazhkai Varalaru* (The Life history of Neelavathi Ramasubramaniam), 1983, pp. 14–57.
- ³² *Kudi Arasu*, 12 October 1930.
- ³³ *Kudi Arasu*, 23 December 1928. Priyar was called *Vaikom Veerar* because of his leadership in the Vaikom Satyagraha (Temple-entry Movement) in 1924.
- ³⁴ The self respect marriage between Marimathu and Thaiyammal took place on 20 April 1930 at Coimbatore. See, *Kudi Arasu*, 27 April 1930.
- ³⁵ W.P.A. Soundara Pandian, one of the leading activists in the movement during the 1930s, conducted widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages among the Nadars.
- ³⁶ For instance see, *Kudi Arasu*, 25 December 1932.
- ³⁷ Sami Chidambaranar, *op.cit.*, p. 323.

- 38 E.Sa. Viswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker*, Madras, 1983, p. 99.
- 39 *Kudi Arasu*, 21 June 1931.
- 40 K. Veeramani (ed.), *Namadu Kurikkol* (Our Objectives), Madras, 1982, pp. 5–12.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 13 and 16–21.
- 42 Sami Chidambaranar, *op.cit.*, p. 218.
- 43 *Kudi Arasu*, 18 May 1930.
- 44 K. Veeramani (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 17.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26; *Kudi Arasu*, 16 August 1931.
- 46 *Kudi Arasu*, 16 August 1931.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 26 June 1932.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 9 April 1933.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 27 May 1934.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 7 February 1937.
- 51 Interview with Rajammal Vasudevan, Darasuram, 21 November 1988.
- 52 Singaravelu Chettiar, a leading activist of the Self Respect Movement in the 1930s, initiated the Self Respect League and started the Samadharma Party along with Periyar.
- 53 Singaravelu Chettiar quoted by C.V.K. Amirthavalliar in her speech made at Kuala Lumpur. See, *Kudi Arasu*, 20 October 1940.
- 54 *Kudi Arasu*, 28 December 1938.
- 55 Under Secretary Safe Secret file, 16 October 1934, Appendix B, Appendix H, pp. 20, 45–48.
- 56 The Tamil Flag carried the symbols of the three ancient kingdoms, i.e., Chera, Chola and Pandias.
- 57 Sami Chidambaranar, *op.cit.*, p. 179.
- 58 Illancheliyan, *Tamilar Thodutha Por* (The War Waged by Tamils), Madras, n.d., pp. 118–19.
- 59 See for example, *Kudi Arasu*, 18 September 1938.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 20 November 1938.
- 61 Illancheliyan, *op.cit.*, pp. 148–49.
- 62 *Ibid.*, pp. 148–50.
- 63 *Kudi Arasu*, 28 December 1938.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 20 November 1938 (emphasis mine).
- 65 Devadasis were young girls dedicated, by custom, to temples and treated as wedded to the God. In practice, these girls, who were often trained in music and dance, were used as concubines by upper-caste men.
- 66 *Kudi Arasu*, 13 December 1925.
- 67 Interview with Mr C. Selvaraj, (The grandson of Ramamirtham Ammaiyar), Madras, 13 July 1989.
- 68 *Kudi Arasu*, 13 December 1925.
- 69 *Murasoli*, Pongal Malar, January 1956, p. 52.
- 70 Interview with Mr C. Selvaraj, *op.cit.*
- 71 For instance see, *Kudi Arasu*, 10 September 1933.

- 72 Interview with Sivagami Chidambaranar, Madras, 5 April 1989.
- 73 Iryanan, *Suyamariyadai Chudoroligal* (Shining Stars of Self Respect Movement), Madras, p. 60; Illanchelian, *op.cit.*, pp. 116–120.
- 74 Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal, *Tasikalin Mosavalai Allathu Matipettra Mainar* (The Treacherous net of the Dasis or a Minor grown wise), Madras, 1936.
- 75 Kamil V. Zvelebil, 'A Devadasi as the author of a Tamil Novel,' *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies*, September, 1987, p. 155.
- 76 Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal, *op.cit.*, pp. 2–4. S. Satyamurthi was the then minister in the Congress legislature who strongly opposed the legislation against the *Devadasi* system.
- 77 *Dravida Nadu*, 22 and 29 April 1945; 13 May 1945.
- 78 Interview with Mr C. Selvaraj, *op.cit.*
- 79 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question*, Occasional Paper No. 94, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1987.
- 80 For an elaboration of this argument with instances, see, Gail Minault, 'The Extended family as Metaphor and the Expansion of Women's Realm' in Gail Minault, ed., *The Extended Family, Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, Delhi, 1981.
- 81 Gail Minault, *op.cit.*, p. 11.
Writing about Nationalist Movement, Partha Chatterjee notes, 'In fact the image of women as Goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home' (See, Partha Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, p. 20).
- 82 Sandip Bandyopadhyay, 'The 'fallen' and Non-cooperation,' *Manushi*, July-August, 1989.
- 83 Thiru V. Kalyasundaranar, *Penin Perumai Allathu Vazkai Thunai*, Madras, 1986 (later edition).
- 84 Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Embattled Advocates: The Debate over Birth Control in India, 1920–1940', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 1, NO. 2, 1989.
- 85 Muthulakshmi Reddi papers, subject file No. 11, Part. II.
- 86 Muthulakshmi Reddi's letter to the editor of *Tamilnadu* (a Tamil newspaper) in Reddi papers, Subject file No. 12, part II, p. 79.
- 87 Swadesamitran, 28 November 1928. A leading Congress activist Salem C. Vijayaraghavachariyar got his daughter, who had not yet attained puberty, hurriedly married, before the child marriage Restraint Act could be enforced. See, C.S. Lakshmi. *The Face behind the Mask, Women in Tamil Literature*, p. 22, Delhi, 1984.
- 88 For instance see, V.B. Thamaraianni's speech at Madras Tamil Women Conference in 1938. Illachelian, *op.cit.*, p. 138.
- 89 K. Veeramani (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 51–64.

Published in Social Scientist, Vol. 19, Nos. 5–6, May–June 1991, pp. 24–41.

Reconceptualising Gender

Phule, Brahmanism and Brahmanical Patriarchy

UMA CHAKRAVARTI

Although the women's question dominated 19th century social reform in India and led to deep seated differences within the emerging *bhadraloka* in Bengal, as well as in a similar class in Maharashtra, there were in my view, only two major critiques of dominant class ideologies on gender in the 19th century. Both these critiques originated in western India and focussed their attention on the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy which was identified as the locus of gender oppression. One came from Jotiba Phule, the non-Brahmana leader of Maharashtra and the other from Pandita Ramabai, a Brahmana widow whose life, work and significance is yet to receive the attention it deserves. Unfortunately, historiography of the social reform movement has tended to concentrate attention on upper caste male reformers who were working broadly within tradition by redefining it and "recasting" women rather than contesting Brahmanical patriarchy, the dominant model of gender relations extant at that time. This historiographical lacuna has caused a certain obscuring of the forms of patriarchy in existence in the 18th and 19th centuries, its relationship to particular castes/classes, and therefore to social and economic structures, making it look as if gender codes were merely a matter of cultural practice rather than built into particular forms of social organization and crucial to their reproduction. We are focussing here on Phule's conceptualization of gender and caste leaving Pandita Ramabai's critique of Brahmanical patriarchy to a larger study now underway.

A useful starting point both in exploring the relationship between particular forms of patriarchy and the social structure in

which it was located, and thereafter a contestation of such a structure, is the Peshwai in 18th century western India. A striking feature of social organization during the Peshwai was the intimate relationship between a concentration of social, economic and political power under the Brahmanas,¹ the reconsolidation of Brahmanical patriarchy,² and traditional caste hierarchy.³ Further the state played a crucial role in the extension of Brahmanical social power and the enforcement of norms and codes of the Brahmanical texts over Brahmana women and the low castes.

The Peshwai sought to recreate, at least ideologically, the model Hindu kingdom where the Brahmanical social order was sought to be "strictly" upheld. In such a situation privileging Brahmanas and suppressing other castes went together. The Peshwais attempt at consolidating the "sacred" traditions indicates that there had been a weakening of social arrangements especially in the practice of caste rules and this may have been a consequence of the less active role played by the state in enforcing textual tradition upon social arrangements earlier on. Similarly, soon after establishing Chitpavan Brahmana rule, the Peshwai issued a set of ordinances in 1735, the *yadi dharmasthapana*, whereby laxity on observing gender codes, especially in the case of Brahmana women, was strictly forbidden and they were brought under the surveillance of the state.⁴ While the sexuality of all women was monitored by the Peshwai differing norms were applied to them according to caste with the most rigorous code being reserved for Brahmana women; through this it was hoped that caste purity would be ensured. The enforced widowhood of Brahmana women thus went along with the most effective surveillance of the nubile widow's sexuality.⁵

By enforcing such rigorous gender and caste codes the Peshwai was clearly seeking to establish its moral legitimacy at a time when its action of usurping power was likely to have been perceived as illegitimate. Be that as it may, what is significant for us is the intimate connection between caste and gender codes and their enforcement by the pre-colonial Brahmanical state in the Poona Daccan. When such a connection was broken, as it appeared to be, when the British established control over the region in 1818, the moment was perceived as an opening for the non-Brahmanas

and later by a section of women. The attack on Brahmanism and the contestation of Brahmanical patriarchy thus became possible in 19th century western India.

An analysis of social processes in 19th century Western India reveals the dual features of class formation wherein the upper castes (primarily, Brahmanical caste groups) sought to adjust to the colonial situation and grasp the opportunities provided by it to form a professional middle class and, simultaneously, the contestation of such a process from the non-Brahmana castes.⁶ Thus Brahmana power was both eroding, being transformed, challenged and being reassembled. The stresses experienced by the Brahmanas through these developments added to the strains of a traditional elite group seeking to define itself in relation to the colonial rulers on the one hand, and to the common folk from which it must distinguish itself on the other.

Gender was crucial to both pressures being experienced by the emerging upper caste/upper class elite. The stresses were particularly acute in shaping the identity of the upper class; while the need for change was evident, it was difficult to incorporate new economic and social relations, urbanization and educational requirements with traditional rituals and practices resulting in a certain ambiguity in the way the upper castes adapted themselves to the pressures. This led to the formation of class fractions with the fractions sharing a similar material relationship but responding in contradictory ways to the social and cultural changes under way. The Brahmana community in particular and the upper castes in general were thus split into two groups with a militant orthodox majority acting militantly in defence of an unaltered tradition and an articulate minority advocating certain limited social changes especially with respect to women's status.⁷ Thus the upholding of tradition was identified with an upholding of Brahmanical patriarchy by the orthodox, and a moderate transformation of Brahmanism and tradition was patriarchy who advocated especially the lifting of the ban on widow remarriage for child widows and introduction of education for women. However, it is necessary to note that the reformers positions on widow remarriage was informed partly by a paternalistic humanism over the miseries of enforced widowhood and partly by the need to manage the

sexuality of the nubile widow; further their advocacy of education was somewhat instrumental with women being envisaged as class socializers, better domestic managers and fitting helpmates for the new class of men. Most significantly, the Brahmana reformers in Maharashtra did not wish to break with Brahmanical traditions and worked within the broad structures of Brahmanical patriarchy and the observance of caste norms. The basically limited nature of their agenda was evident in their handling of history and their focus on recovering a pristine past or a golden age, which was the real "tradition",⁸ rather than critiquing the structures of caste, or patriarchy. The limitations of such a position surfaced repeatedly, first in the anxiety of the moderate reformers to heal their breach with the orthodox following the split in the community over the widow remarriage issue,⁹ and then in the inability to reconcile their intellectual and moral positions with their actions in their personal lives. The contradictions were captured by Ranade in his own life when he "succumbed" to pressure and married a young girl of eleven (while he was thirty two and a widower) even though he had vigorously advocated widow marriage.¹⁰

But the most notable aspect of the relationship between the "orthodox" and the "reformist" caste/class fractions was their inextricable link with each other through their common social location when it came to their position vis-à-vis the challenge from the non-Brahmana movement. Both caste fractions defended their privileges, their monopoly over education, and through it their virtual monopoly over the administrative positions open to Indians, and implicitly their "natural" right to social leadership.¹¹ We need to bear this in mind when we look at the real contestation of "tradition" and of traditional Brahmanical leadership represented by Phule. While he had worked with the liberal Brahmana reformers¹² in his early years he saw in the *Sarvajanika Sabha* of Ranade and other Brahmanas a continuation of Brahmana hegemony and therefore, of the Brahmanical hold upon social and cultural practices. His own *Satyasodhaka Samaja* was counter to the Brahmana dominated *Sarvajanika Sabha*. Phule understood the dyadic nature of Ranade and Tilak for whom they were ultimately only two sides of the same culture and tradition. As the century unfolded, even though Ranade and Tilak were locked in a bitter

struggle against each other, nationalism provided an opportunity to both as representatives of their class the occasion to recapture more firmly the social leadership of western India. For Phule on the other hand British power was the countervailing force against traditional Brahmanical leadership. It was viewed as providing the necessary space for the lower orders to turn the balance of social forces in their favour. The essential contradiction in 19th century Maharashtrian society thus was between the Brahmanas and the non-Brahmanas and not between the liberal reformers and the militant nationalists as has been represented in most historical writing.

This overview of 19th century social history is required to locate the place of gender in shaping the cultural identity of the class that conceptualized the embryonic nation, the place of "tradition" and history in determining the nature of changes required in women's status commensurate with class, caste and "national" identity and the limitations, therefore, in mounting a real challenge to the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy. Dominant class ideologies, whether orthodox or liberal, did not challenge also the class and caste structures of which Brahmanical patriarchy was an inherent part.

In contrast to the dyad of Ranade and Tilak among Brahmana leaders was Jotiba Phule,¹⁴ unique among the non-Brahmana leaders and unique too among 19th century male social reformers. Unlike the Brahmana leaders who could not break with tradition of the base, and were therefore, unable in most cases to reconcile their moral positions with their personal lives thus creating severe ambiguities, Phule's political position was such that he could cut himself free from existing traditions and stand outside Brahmanism by rejecting it, both of which enabled him to attempt to stand outside patriarchy. In his polemical attack on Brahmanism gender was no doubt an effective weapon since the most visible forms of women's oppression dominating middle class perception were unique to upper caste women. But gender inequality was not merely a useful weapon in his arsenal against Brahmanism; since it was firmly embedded in social institutions spanning all the castes. Phule had to confront patriarchy within the non-Brahmana castes too. In this context too Phule was remarkable; first he was unlike

many non-Brahmana leaders before (and after) him who worked within the cultural hegemony of Brahmanism¹⁵ and therefore, were part of the moves seeking upward mobility for their castes rather than rejecting caste hierarchy *per se*. This led them to adopt the rituals and practices of the upper castes the most important being enforced widowhood. Along with the practice of female seclusion such moves exacerbated patriarchy. Phule's rejection of Sanskritisation thus enabled him to reject Brahmanism and the ideology of Brahmanical patriarchy. Further, since Phule did not endorse a consensus approach in the matter of social relations, which was the cornerstone of the liberal Brahmana agenda, and increasingly adopted a conflict approach towards Brahmanism and the caste system he could conceptually at least, extend some of this understanding into the sphere of patriarchy as we shall see. Consequently, Phule was able to adopt a far more radical position on gender than any of his contemporaries.

Phule's views on gender inequality may be discerned more often from his life* and career rather than from the explicit references he made to gender; these were concentrated in the writings of his later years. Omvedt has suggested that Phule's focus on women's oppression came too late in his life for him to pay sufficient attention to women in his reconstruction of the village communities or to include symbols relating to women in his construction of a Sudra-peasant identity.¹⁶ More importantly, it may be argued that his analysis of caste thus could not centrally integrate gender as a crucial element in its reproduction,¹⁷ but no one in his generation did so for that matter. Despite this, he remains unique in targetting something like patriarchy, or male power and privileges within the family. Phule's negation of Hinduism and the caste system was so complete that he negated to the structure of gender relations built into it, premised as it was upon caste purity and therefore, upon repressive sexual codes for women. Since he neither had to

* As for example his refusal to succumb to family pressure and marry a second time because he and his wife were childless; he argued that to do so would be to accept a double standard of morality where such an option was not available to women.

salvage caste, religion, or a great past, his approach to gender was quite unorthodox.

Phule's belief in the power of education to liberate the subordinated and provide new modes of social perception to them could have been the starting point for his interest in reforms for women. Phule was only twenty one when he opened his first school in Poona in 1848; significantly it was for low caste untouchable girls. Earlier in the year Phule had visited the American mission school for low caste girls in Ahmednagar which may have provided the model for his own venture.¹⁸ But by initiating his own educational institutions with a school for girls, Phule was making a statement on the lowest among the low in Hindu society: the low caste woman. In setting it up in Poona, still the centre of conservative Brahmanas, Phule was also issuing an open challenge to them and their views on learning for the low castes and women which had restricted knowledge and made it an instrument of power.

Phule's biographers detail the difficulties he faced in keeping the institution going, of the outraged reaction of the orthodox, and the pressure exerted upon his family which caved under it.¹⁹ Phule and his wife Savitribai had to leave home because of social pressure upon his father and in the face of the difficulties of finding teachers. Savitribai herself took on the task of teaching the girls. Predictably, she was subjected to much abuse and humiliation by the orthodox who were furious at the temerity of a low caste woman in empowering herself and then empowering others like her.

The importance of the project of education was evident in the arguments Phule and his colleagues provided for it: the failure to educate women was the prime cause of India's decline and was reflected in the material and intellectual impoverishment of contemporary Indian society.²⁰ The link-up between the decline of education and the decline of a people was not unique to Phule as it was a common argument of 19th century reformers. What was distinctive however was the rationale for female education. While for the upper caste/middle class new class of men, for Phule education was the third eye—the instrument by which a new mode of understanding social relations was acquired. Further, this was as essential for low caste women as it was for low caste men. Phule

pinpointed this in a speech while castigating traditional attitudes:

In their opinion, women should forever be kept in obedience, should not be given any knowledge, should not be well educated, should not know about religion (and) should not mix with men . . .²¹

It was to get the power to distinguish good and bad, between what to accept and what to abandon that education was required in Phule's view.

The potential explosiveness of education for low caste girls was evident in an essay written by Muktabai, a fourteen year old Mang girl in Phule's school. She had been a student at this school for about three years when she wrote the essay entitled "About the Grievs of the Mangs and Mahara" (*Mang Maharachya Dukha Visiyi*)²² describing the humiliating conditions under which the Mangs and Mahars existed. It is clear from Muktabai's essay that it is mainly her experience as a Mang, rather than as a Mang girl in particular, that informs her understanding of dominance and power. What is also evident is that Muktabai represents the best example of Phule's belief that a special vision, a *traitiya ratna*, would be the outcome of education containing the means to strip the falsity of Brahmanic ideology. It enabled her to proclaim, "let that religion, where only one person is privileged and the rest deprived, perish from the earth, and let it never enter our minds to be proud of such a religion."²³

Muktabai's brief essay dwells on themes which in varying degrees inform the 19th century non-Brahmana writing: the first is an acute awareness of the Peshwai as a period of an extraordinarily arbitrary power for Brahmanas and thus an unmediated oppressive time for the low castes: their hold over the administration, especially the revenue administration (a gift of the Peshwai) had given the Brahmanas unique control over the labouring peoples; second, the prohibition of knowledge for the low castes was the work of the Brahmanas; third, Muktabai dwells on the theme of dispossession of the ancestors of the lower castes from their lands and the distribution of material assets and power between the Brahmanas and others—the Brahmanas as revenue officers and the other castes in degrading occupations such as the barber "who has to go about shaving the heads of widows"; and finally, Muktabai

is extremely insightful about the way Brahmanic ideology works to create a complex structure of hierarchy where the low castes themselves are graded into less polluting and more polluting with the former having power over the latter. The fragmentation of the underprivileged had been an important theme of Phule's writing but Muktabai's inclusion of relations between Mangs and Mahars in her short essay indicates awareness of the multiple processes which had survived despite the formal cessation of Brahmanic power with the end of the Peshwai.

It is only when Muktabai describes the inhuman consequences of untouchability that her insights into the experiences of low caste women are evident. Beginning with an attack on the psychological and material dimensions of untouchability in the grief and poverty it entails, Muktabai addresses the Brahmanas:

Oh learned Pandits wind up the selfish prattle of your hollow wisdom and listen to what I have to say. When our women give birth to babies they do not even have a roof over their heads. How they suffer rain and cold. Try to think about it from your own experience. Suppose the women suffered from puerperal disease, from where could they have found money for the doctor or medicine? Was there ever any doctor among you who was human enough to treat people free of charge?²⁴

Another vulnerable group like low caste women were low caste children whose humiliation began in early childhood itself: "The Mang and Mahar children never lodge a complaint even if the Brahmin children throw stones at them and injure them seriously. . . ." ²⁵

Muktabai's essay ended abruptly, "Oh god! What agony is this? I will burst into tears if I write more about this injustice."²⁶ Even so, the anguished Muktabai had understood and rejected the existing social order and provided a scathing critique of Brahmanical power in 19th century Maharashtra. The newly acquired skills of literacy for this untouchable woman had made it possible to interrogate, in print, the most "sacred" person in the social hierarchy and reject unequivocally his "knowledge" and his authority.

The theme of knowledge, its closely guarded nature in caste

society, and its potential for reversing the low status of the lower castes is evident also in Savitribai Phule's letter to Jotiba written in 1856. Away at her parental home to recover from an illness Savitribai spiritedly defended her activities in Poona in which she taught Mangs and Mahars. "The lack of learning is nothing but gross bestiality" she told her brother. "It was the possession of knowledge that gave the Brahmanas their superior status. Learning has a great value. One who masters it loses his lowly status and achieves the higher one', she added, rebutting her brother's plea that she and Jotiba should follow the customs of their caste and the dictates of the Brahmanas rather than take on different social roles than those allotted to them.

Muktabai and Savitribai's writing represents one aspect of Phule's reformist intervention in relation to women: the focus on education of low caste women and their empowerment through it; the other arena of intervention was the humiliation imposed upon Brahmana widows. While Phule did not dwell in any noticeable manner upon upper caste women within their own families the widow's place at the receiving end of Brahmanical patriarchy (which was beginning to feature in reformist discourse) became the centre of some characteristically dramatic moves made by him. The structural relationship between the low castes, subjected to the power of the Brahmanas, and the Brahmana widow subjected to the power of Brahmanical patriarchy was implicitly recognized in Phule's reformist work.

The material and sexual consequences of enforced widowhood were responsible for a large number of such young women becoming pregnant and having to hide their condition for fear of excommunication. Phule and Savitribai provided support to them by instituting an orphanage for the children born to Brahmana widows.²⁹ In his forthright manner Phule published handbills proclaiming the setting up of the orphanage to prevent infanticide thus picking on one of the most vulnerable of spots in Brahmanism, the lynchpin of upper caste gender codes—enforced widowhood and its consequences. With this Phule forced into the open a problem that the Brahmanas would rather deal with in the customary manner: by pretending that it did not exist, or through punitive measures such as *ghatasphota*, a symbolic death ritual for

those who were outcasted leading to the complete social boycott of the widow. More routinely the humiliation of widows was compounded by enforced tonsure. Phule is attributed in the popular consciousness with spearheading a barber's strike where they refused to perform the customary tonsure of widows

While Phule devoted considerable attention to enforced widowhood among upper caste women he was conscious of the differences among women based on caste and their place in the system of production. In the *Shetkaryaca Asud* for example he described the hardships experienced by labouring women which he contrasted with the relative ease of the lives of Brahmana women.³⁰ In the last decade of his life Phule's understanding of women's oppression moved to a formulation where he argued that they were conditioned by a structure of relations that we might recognize as akin to patriarchy. The understanding was expressed when Phule publicly defended both Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde; in Ramabai's case he mounted an attack on Brahmanism, in which much of the high caste woman's oppression was located. In Tarabai's case he went further as he was critical of his own compatriots in the non-Brahmana movement with regard to recognizing women's subordination.

Phule's defence of Tarabai is most significant. As a non-Brahmana woman who had taken a public stand in her work *Stri-Purusa tulana* (1882)³¹ against women's subordination and had shocked some of the non-Brahmana activists because of her indictment of forms of patriarchy among Kunbis and other non-Brahmana castes. Tarabai's book was written in response to the trial of a Brahmana widow, Vijaylakshmi, accused of killing her newborn "illegitimate" baby. The trial aroused a great deal of attention in the press with much fierce criticism of the immorality of widows and the need for rigorous control of female sexuality. Using the reactions of men to the "immorality" of women Tarabai had launched a bitter polemic against the hypocrisy of men and their oppression of women. Using also the style perfected by the non-Brahmanas against Brahmanism Tarabai attempted to unravel the working of patriarchy pointing to its growing forms among the non-Brahmana castes as they too adopted the custom of enforced widowhood prevalent among the Brahmanas. She attacked men

for giving up their traditions in the matter of dress as they outwardly took to "modern" gear but failed to transform themselves in their behaviour to their womenfolk. Tarabai too, like Phule, saw British presence as a countervailing power which could "discipline" men. Both the direct and hardhitting style as well as the content of Tarabai's work was received with outrage by men. Inevitably she received a hostile press and this included the non-Brahmana run newspapers. Bhalekar, the non-Brahmana leader who had been associated with Phule was among those critical of Tarabai's work. It is not surprising that Tarabai never wrote anything after the *Stri-Purusa tulana*.³² Phule's intervention in the debate on Tarabai was thus extremely important. It was a recognition that the non-Brahmana movement had neglected the need for an analysis of gender. Phule's reaction to Bhalekar's criticism of Tarabai was as fierce as his critique of Brahmanism. The traditional Indian family system was based on a double standard of morality. There was an urgent need to break down the authoritarian structure within the family and build a new and equalitarian relationship between men and women, leading to true equality in society.

Phule's defence of Tarabai and Ramabai are contained in two articles published in *Satsar* (the essence of truth) in September and October 1885.³³ In both, Phule uses the criticism levelled against Tarabai for her publication and Ramabai for her conversion to Christianity in England in the Marathi press as a take-off point to expose the nature of 19th century Maharashtrian society. Among the newspapers mentioned by Phule were the *Indu Prakasa*, *Jnana Prakasa*, *Jnana Caksu*, *Kesari*, and *Pune Vaibhava*. Ramabai was castigated in particular for "fooling the public", an obvious reference to the fact that, by and large, Ramabai had received a sympathetic press as long as she subscribed to the liberal Brahmana reformist programme. In fact she had been something of a star, the Gargi and Maitreyi come alive for those reformist Brahmanas who wished a restoration of the great golden age of the ancient past. Ramabai's conversion to Christianity was a slap in the face for all sections of the Brahmanas because it was unprecedented—no woman with a public image had done so as yet—and because it drew attention to a Brahmana widow's dissatisfaction not just

with traditional but also with reformist Brahmanical society. The reaction to her conversion was hysterical; as Phule points out in the *Satsar* even the Sudras joined the chorus.

Phule skilfully uses Ramabai's conversion to build a critique of Brahmanism based on caste and gender oppression. He dwells particularly on the ambiguous position of the liberal Brahmanas on both forms of inequity as well as to their inconsistency in first extolling Ramabai for her intelligence and courage and then regarding her as a *batli*, one who is fallen, or impure. In this the 'Aryabrahmanas' were behaving exactly as they had with Tukaramdas, accepting his Bhakti poetry and yet treating the Sudras badly. Phule suggests that Ramabai's earlier Phase, when she had lectured on Hindu religious themes, held no interest for the Sudras since she seemed to be ignorant, at that time, of the oppressive dimensions of Hindu texts. However her search for a more humane system brought her closer to other oppressed people. Ramabai's critique of Brahmanical patriarchy is implicitly associated with education which is truly empowering. If the Sudras begin to be educated like Brahmana women they too would understand their rights, Phule wrote. Throughout his two articles in the *Satsar* Phule implicitly connects women and the Sudras as the two oppressed groups under Brahmanism and continuously slides from one to the other. He refers explicitly to women and the Sudras as *din*. Attacks on them in the press were baseless and repressive, made only by those who gained from the subordination of women. Phule argues further that the allegations against women, made in the press, were a consequence of the envy and intolerance of women who were beginning to express themselves by articulating their views in print. Phule draws attention repeatedly to the unintended consequences of initiating education for women wherein the 'Aryas' had tried to absolve themselves of the guilt of denying education to women but had envisaged a limited agenda. In Phule's view, as the educated women came to realize what the text actually contained, as someone like Ramabai had done, they'd tear such arguments to shreds. Once this happened the Aryas would stop educating women and ban them from touching the texts. Returning then to the Sudras, Phule noted regretfully that since the Sudras did not read anyway they had yet to discover what was

wrong with the Brahmanical texts unlike the 'Arya' women who had begun to reject the texts once they could read them. Phule is thus acutely conscious of the relationship between knowledge and power and the need to have democratic access to knowledge to overthrow the power that its monopoly gave rise to.

Phule's defence of Tarabai and Ramabai included pointing out that only someone who had suffered could understand the nature of oppression: only a woman could understand another woman. Since the newspaper world was dominated by men it was natural that they would throw a critique of patriarchy into the dustbin. Phule scornfully dismisses the hysterical editors as appearing puny in the presence of women like Tarabai and Ramabai and then launches into an exposé of the double standards of men. For example it was men who went to prostitutes and yet they'd call them *patra* (fallen women). They accuse women of vices but are themselves lustful pursuing women all the time even when they are past their prime. Finally when these immoral men die their wives are expected to submit to the barber's hold and have their heads shaved, give up all ornaments and adopt an ascetic life, or mount the pyre in the hope of getting "*punya*" as a *sati*. Phule concludes by comparing the violent nature of men who fight wars and enslave others with women who have to bear the ravages of such violence with fortitude.

Phule's critique of Brahmanism, Brahmanical patriarchy and other forms of patriarchy was not confined to writing about it as it has been argued earlier since he made a conscious attempt to practice a more equalitarian relationship within the family is evident in Phule's last work, *Sarvajanik Satyadharma*, where he replaced the term "men" (*manus*) with *sarva ekander stri purusha* (every woman and man) and in the marriage promises of the Satyashodhak weddings where the groom admitted that he could never experience women's suffering, but vowed to give his bride full rights.³⁴

Phule's vision of a radical democratic society was his answer to traditional social relations where the suppression of the lower castes had gone alongside a suppression of women. Finally, even though his concern for gender equality did not receive the same focussed attention as caste, in Phule's conceptualization the future

democratic society was to be based on a new set of relations linking equality, labour, and education together both for exploited men of the lower castes and oppressed women of all castes.

(I am grateful to Sudhanwa Deshpande for translating two issues of the *Satsar* from Marathi to English and to Gail Omvedt, Ram Bapat, and G.P. Deshpande for sharing some of their ideas with me. The responsibility for the way the arguments have shaped in this paper however is of course mine.)

Notes and References

- ¹ Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1968, p. 44.
- ² Uma Chakravarti, *Gender, Class and Nation: Ramabai and the Critique of Brahmanical Patriarchy* (forthcoming); V.S. Kadam "The institution of marriage and position of women in eighteenth century Maharashtra", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 25, 3, 1988 pp. 347-70.
- ³ Hiroshi Fukazawa, "State and Caste System (jati) in the Eighteenth Century Maratha Kingdom", *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics*, 9.1.1968, pp. 32-44.
- ⁴ Kadam, "The institution of marriage", pp. 347-50; 355-57.
- ⁵ Kadam, "The institution of marriage", pp. 355-57.
- ⁶ Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India: 1873 to 1930*, Bombay, 1976, pp. 98-136; Richard Tucker, "The early setting of the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra", *The Indian Historical Review*, 7, 1-2, 1980, pp. 134-159.
- ⁷ Summarized from Uma Chakravarti, *Gender, Class and Nation*; Tucker, "From Dharmashastra to politics", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 7, 3, 1970, pp. 329-37.
- ⁸ Joan Leopold, "The Aryan theory of race", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 7, 2, 1970, pp. 279-81; Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi", in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women*, Delhi, 1989, pp. 50ff.
- ⁹ Richard Tucker, "From Dharmashastra to politics", pp. 336-38; "Early setting of the non-Brahmin movement", pp. 152-54.
- ¹⁰ Ramabai Ranade, *Ranade: His Wife's Reminiscences*, translated from Marathi by Deshpande, Delhi, 1963, pp. 32-36.
- ¹¹ Summarized from Uma Chakravarti, *Gender, Class and Nation*.
- ¹² Richard Tucker, "The early setting of the non-Brahmin movement", pp. 152-57.
- ¹³ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 206-302.
- ¹⁴ Gail Omvedt, "Jotiba Phule, the Bahujan Samaj and women", Typescript.
- ¹⁵ Summarized from Uma Chakravarti, *Gender, Class and Nation*.
- ¹⁶ Gail Omvedt, "Jotiba Phule, the Bahujan Samaj and women".

- Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualizing Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: gender, caste, class and state", paper presented at seminar on *Women's Studies in India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 21–26 September, 1992.
- ¹⁸ Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste and Ideology*, p. 118.
 - ¹⁹ Dhananjay Keer, *Mahatma Jotirao Phooley*, Bombay, 1974, pp. 28ff.
 - ²⁰ Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, pp. 119.
 - ²¹ Dnyanodaya, 1 April 1853, cited in Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, p. 119.
 - ²² Muktabai, "Mang Maharchya Dukhavisayi" 1855, reprinted in *Dnyadoya Centenary volumes*, (ed) B.P. Hivale, 1942, cited in Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, Delhi, 1991, Vol. I pp. 215–16.
 - ²³ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁴ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁵ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁶ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁷ Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, pp. 213–214.
 - ²⁸ Uma Chakravarti, *Gender, Class and Nation*.
 - ²⁹ Dhananjay Keer, *Mahatma Jotirao Phooley*, pp. 86–87; Gail Omvedt, 'Jotiba Phule, the Bahujan Samaj and women.'
 - ³⁰ Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, p. 262.
 - ³¹ Tarabai Shinde, *Stri-Purusha tulana*, Pune, 1882, from Rosalind O' Hanlon, Delhi.
 - ³² Rosalind O' Hanlon, Introduction to the English version of *Stri-Purusha tulana*.
 - ³³ Jotiba Phule, *Satsar* (The Essence of Truth), September and October 1885, Y.D. Phadke, *Collected works of Jotiba Phule*, Bombay, 1991, pp. 345–62, 363–83.
 - ³⁴ Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*, p. 111.

From Kiran Pawar (ed) *Women in Indian History: Social, Economic, Political and Cultural Perspectives*, 1996. Patiala and New Delhi: Vision and Venture, pp. 161–76.

Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship

V. GEETHA

My paper is not about independent India. It seemed to me that the progress or retardation of the women question in independent India cannot be grasped, unless one possesses a complex and nuanced understanding of the events that lead to the exit of the British from this subcontinent. Such an understanding cannot merely veer between the elite and subaltern versions of Indian nationalism, but would have to actively engage with the histories and ideologies of social and political movements whose founding premises were not, in fact, are not definable within the terms of Indian nationalism. I propose to examine aspects of such a history, a history that will enable us to re-inscribe the context and content of independence as well as make for a different and more imaginative engagement with contemporary feminist concerns.

I look here at aspects of the Self-Respect Movement, a radical anti-caste movement begun by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar in 1925, and which convulsed the Tamil country into eruptions of defiance, anger and subversion for the next two decades. Later, Periyar's movement suffered several mutations. The Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) was formed in 1944 by Periyar himself, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949, by a group of men who were dissatisfied with the DK. Both organizations continue to be vocal and active in Tamil politics today. However, it seems to me that in different ways, both have compromised and even reneged on the founding ideals of the Self-Respect Movement. This is so, particularly, with reference to the women's question, the resolution of which was quite central to the self-respecters' anti-caste agenda.

While some formal victories have been secured meanwhile, such as the legalization of self-respect marriages, which desacralised marriage and re-defined it as a contract for living together, and the securing of women's rights to property in law—both of which were made into law, when the DMK was in power previously—there have been no other substantial achievements. The DK continues to affirm the importance of securing women's rights and liberation as part of its "consciousness raising" politics, but its gestures in this matter have proved more formal than substantive, more a repetition of time-worn ideas rather than imaginative interventions in the debates and struggles currently being carried out by women's groups. There are individuals, in and out of the party, who continue to affiliate themselves with Periyar's ideas on gender and work around rights issues, but the DK as an organization plods along in a well rehearsed path.

But then history works its effects in curious ways. For one, historical change does not always follow a linear path and, secondly, the past catches up with the present in very many unexpected ways; so much so that to reclaim an inheritance, one feels impelled to begin, not from the formal, official legacy which often serves the political and strategic interests of the particular ruling group in question, but from a chosen point of arrival, and then loop around the present to connect up with the past. For me, the point of arrival of an interesting and relevant legacy is the present, a present, dominated by interesting debates in women's groups—in Tamil Nadu—on the complex and fraught relationship between gender and caste on one hand, and a dalit political militancy on the other. It is from this present moment that I wish to interrogate a past which I think speaks to contemporary feminist concerns and anxieties, especially to those who are engaged in debating questions of identity and community and exploring the possibilities of justice for women in a social context, where neither law nor community, in themselves, seem to be able to guarantee women their fundamental rights.

E.V. Ramasamy Periyar died in 1973. He was 95. Two years before his death, he explained his life's work thus:

Though I have endeavoured all along to abolish caste, as far as this country is concerned, this has meant I carry out propaganda for the

abolition of god, religion, the shastras and brahmins. For caste will disappear only when these four disappear. Even if one of these were to remain, caste will not be abolished in its entirety . . . because caste has been constructed out of these four . . . only after man has become a slave and a fool would caste have thus been imposed on society.

—Periyar, *Ninety-Third Birthday Souvenir*, January 17, 1971 [Anaimuthu 1974: 1974].

Periyar viewed his life's mission as nothing less than millennial and constantly sought to locate the new citizen he wished to constitute in an anticipated utopia. The future was everything and the present and past were important, in as far as they could be subjected to careful scrutiny by a watchful, yet, ironic reason, which looked to sift, from these times, moments of rational, intelligent worth, moments which were to usher in the millennium.

Given the near-visionary resonance which Periyar brought to his life's work, it becomes somewhat difficult to separate his political and social legacy from his prophetic world view. This may seem a somewhat surprising observation, since there have been and there are several political movements and parties which claim Periyar for their own; which seek to place him at the origins of a distinctive politics of nation and caste, defined in and through the terms of what may be termed a non-brahmin exceptionalism. But though Periyar's vision has been thus politicized, made to bear witness to a non-brahmin and, in some instances, a Tamil will to power, it, yet resists a complete co-optation into politics; remains stubborn in its autonomy, intimating to the interlocutor of today, the presence of an abiding ethic which is not at all explicable in terms of quotidian politics and its constitutive ideology, electoral democracy.

It is this ethic which is the subject of this paper: I hope to explore it for the lessons and the inspiration it may hold out for contemporary feminist debates and practice. It seems to me that this ethic, which, I believe, has survived politics, even at the risk of being marginalised by it, speaks to feminists today with an urgent appeal.

Placing Periyar

From his earliest days in public life, Periyar was wary and contemp-

tuous of politics, the realm of power, contention, manipulation and machinations, of office, honours and authority. When he launched the Self-Respect Movement in 1925, he consciously chose to work in, what we today, refer to as civil society. Then, this was a restricted space, held captive to colonialist 'native' intelligentsia. This colonial subject, male, upper caste and middle class, on his way to becoming a nationalist, dominated civic life in the Tamil country, as elsewhere: a civic life, devoted to ideas, agitations, meetings, mobilization of men and resources and which engaged the colonial state in a vigorous dialogue, confronting it with its professed commitment to progress and freedom. These articulate and earnest men fashioned for themselves a sober, solemn subjectivity, anticipating an ideal of citizenship, which, in the years to come, would find its most lofty expression in the Constitution of free India. But in the 1920s and 1930s, this ideal was only in the making and was subject to the attractions of that curious admixture of politics and piety, which Gandhi embodied in his person and utilized to justify his practice. The colonialist (nationalist) subject's dream of a modern, free nation was riddled with fantasy and nostalgia, elements which were crucial to Gandhi's vision of free India, of a Hind Swaraj.

Periyar, iconoclastic, sensitive to caste as a system of inequality and cruelty, was initially a fellow traveller with these dreamers of modern India: he was much influenced by the Gandhi of the mid- and late-1920s, inspired by the ideals of non-cooperation and constructive work. However, he inflected the Gandhian ideal in his own terms. As he wrote in the very first issue of his remarkable weekly, *Kudi Arasu*:

A sense of self-respect and fraternity must arise within human society. Notions of high and low amongst men should disappear. A sense of the unity of all humankind must dawn in each of us. Communal confrontations must cease to be. In the course of propagating these ideals, we will not hesitate to take on friend or foe if they range themselves against us and criticize us through word and deed [Anaimuthu 1974: xxiv].

Periyar's re-reading of Gandhi was particularly evident in his definition of untouchability. It is clear from his pronouncements

of this period that he held the abolition of untouchability to be contingent on the attainment of self-respect by the 'adi dravidas'. Thus, he would imprecate, rage, cajole and persuade adi dravidas to fight an oppression which inhered as much in their felt lowliness, as it did in those social and economic structures which utilized their labour and cast them aside as untouchable (*Kudi Arasu*, May 24, 1925; June 21, 1925). Periyar also made it clear that the liberation of other non-brahmin castes lay in the liberation of the adi dravidas [Anaimutha 1974: 404]. This anti-caste, egalitarian vision sustained Periyar's work and thought, even after he broke faith with Gandhi. This happened in 1927, after Gandhi had expressed at a public meeting in Mysore, his faith in the norms of 'varna-dharma'. Periyar had been uneasily aware of Gandhi's peculiarly convoluted arguments about caste and untouchability and *Kudi Arasu* carried a courteous but firmly-voiced criticism of Gandhi's stance in this respect in late 1925. The critic, one Pandit Dharma Deva Siddhanta Alangarar, had remarked that by endorsing 'varna' differences, Gandhi was creating obstacles in the way of the one objective dear to his heart; the abolition of untouchability (*Kudi Arasu*, September 13, 1925).

After 1927, Periyar undertook a systematic, relentless campaign against the Mahatma's politics of piety on the one hand and on the other hand, chose to work in those very spaces Gandhi had recognized as pertinent, both for the transformation of Hindu (and by implication, Indian) subjectivity and the drawing of Hind Swaraj. There were spaces constituted by the interlinked realms of consciousness, communication, sexuality and identity. To re-work and reclaim these spaces for a radical utopia, Periyar founded the Self-Respect Movement in 1925 and worked hard to advance a counter to both the lures of the Gandhian Congress as an institution and nationalism as an ideology. He rejected the latter's claims as the ethic of our times and chose, instead, to create a social and cultural movement of revolt—against, caste, brahminism, religion and the rule of men over women. Periyar's antagonism as well as affiliation to Gandhi need to be understood if we are to map the coordinates of his distinctive ethic. Besides, Periyar's life, world view, practice and ideas represent, in their complex articulation with one another, an experience, a consciousness, a politics

that modern India did not choose and, as such, indicate choices which the so-called makers of modern India consciously eschewed and actively cast aside.

Where Gandhi looked to an abiding and deeply felt religious faith, experienced by him, at least, as an ineffable inner voice, an instruction from a morally sensitive conscience, to sustain political and social activism, Periyar trusted to reason. Defined by him as an intelligence which sought to splice apart and critically examine all sorts of phenomena, this reason existed in his lexicon as an adjunct of a fearless, questioning self; which was determined to claim its autonomy and dignity in a society which, for centuries, had subjected either to the brahmin's cunning power, divisions of caste and to notions of intellectual and ethical lowliness. Describing his epistemology, as it were, he once observed that he had always tried to go beyond appearances to get at the truth behind phenomena. As far as he was concerned, it was his power of rationality which helped him do this [Anaimuthu 1974: 2009]. It was for this reason that Periyar praised and upheld the example set by the Buddha. He remarked that the Buddha had counselled men to use their minds and follow the dictates of their intelligence. He had also asked men to exercise their freedom to reject what their rational minds could not comprehend or accept, such as heaven, hell, salvation, and differences between human beings, such as brahmin, shudra and panchama [Anaimuthu 1974: 307].

What was 'truth' to Gandhi, directing him to offer satyagraha in various instances was sophistry to Periyar for, as he observed, the 'truths' which the Mahatma claimed for his own cannot be considered given and universal. For Periyar, truth was essentially relative and subjective and he did not imagine that there existed a surefire test that would help one ascertain what was truth and what was not in any given instance. The 'triumph of truth' Periyar argued, represented, more often than not, a triumph of cunning and authority. For one was as likely to submit to a regimen of truth, as to be convinced of it. For his own ideas, Periyar made no absolute claims and insisted they were to be accepted or discarded by subjecting them to rational and critical scrutiny at various moments in time. If Gandhi rested his 'truth' in a transcendence he believed to exist, Periyar refused to rest his arguments in anything,

but the claims of the oppressed in the here and now (*Kudi Arasu*, September 6, 1931).

Where Gandhi demanded penitence and sacrifice, as for example, with the practice of untouchability, and insisted that only a morally active and repentant self can bring about social reform, Periyar advocated resistance and struggle, often urging his self-respecters to bring to the fore, those antagonisms and contradictions in caste society and act on them. This was particularly evident in Periyar's remonstrance to the adi dravidas. Rather than appeal to their felt lowliness, he sought to provoke their sense of defiance and anger. He upbraided them for referring to upper caste men as 'swamis', and for letting themselves be convinced that their physical condition—of dirt, ill-health and sickness—was because they had not worked enough to lift themselves out of their misery [Anaimuthu 1974: 56]. He implored to look to and understand the system which required their labour and therefore kept them confined to a position of abject lowliness [Anaimuthu 1974: 71-72].

Where Gandhi communicated through complex metaphors drawn from the language of faith and devotion, appealing to the meditative self, Periyar spoke as a pedagogue, a teacher, who sought to expound ideas and encourage discussion, debate and dialogue. Periyar was given to concluding his addresses with an entreaty: his listeners were to think through whatever they had heard at the meeting and decide for themselves if there were reason and justice in the things which had been told them.

Where Gandhi looked to Tolstoy, the righteous prophet, Periyar invoked Socrates; the 'ashram' with its experiments in truth was counterpoised the 'agora', that public and civic space to which all manner of people could claim access and rights. The Self-Respect Movement in fact caused the agora to come into existence for hundreds of ordinary people; adi dravidas and women not only attended self-respect meetings in large numbers, but took part and addressed the movement's several conferences.

Gandhi's piety and transcendence committed him and the Indian National Congress to a politics which commanded mass elevation, but, which, in the final analysis, was dictated by the hegemonic demands of multi-layered Congress leadership and the

material interests of a confident and growing bourgeoisie [Ghosh 1989; 1995]. Periyar's reason and commitment to the agora of the here and now left him with a constituency that was shifting, and which existed as a whole only in terms of that large and complex non-brahmin historic bloc, Periyar attempted to build and re-build. Sometimes this bloc appeared divided and internally inconsistent, as when rich non-brahmins found themselves being criticized for their class biases by young self-respecters committed to socialism. At other times, there ensued arguments between believers and atheists; between those who were convinced of the cultural worth of Saivism and those who felt all religious ideas and institutions were inexorably brahminical. Yet, Periyar's Catholic non-brahminism and his anti-caste mission held this unwieldy bloc together, especially at those strategic and crucial moments, when the larger interests of all non-brahmins were at stake, as during the anti-Hindi agitations and when the Congress ministry—formed after the 1935 elections—tried to impose an educational system that would allow youngsters to practise the caste vocation of their fathers. For Gandhi, for all that piety and faith, the here and now of politics proved determinate, whereas for Periyar, committed to the present and scorning transcendence, the future seemed to hold infinite promises.

Gandhi imaged the socially conscious and active subject of history as a devout upper caste Hindu, essentially noble and pious, who, of his own volition, would surrender his privileges and usher in change conferring, as it were, equality and self-respect on those whom, until recently, he had imposed his logic of difference and exclusion. This subject was to attain his own in history through a conscious re-making of his subjectivity through specific acts of penance and sacrifice. He had to discover the untouchable in himself, suffer his indignity as his own and thereby cleanse himself of disgust, prejudice, fear and hatred. Likewise, by spinning, wearing khadi and working with his hands, he was to acknowledge and make his own, the labour and life of the Hindu peasant and weaver. At another level, he was expected to re-examine his sexual identity, since it was a particular deployment of masculinity, premised on desire, its satiation and the eruption of desire again, which forced men to think dark thoughts, bred incontinence in

all aspects of life and thereby, urged them onto unethical action. The 'brahmacharya vrata', which Gandhi counselled to his male disciples, why even to Congressmen, rested on a particular vision of femininity: if men were to renounce desire, and forswear the excess and violence which desire propelled into existence, women had to rework the terms of conjugality. They were to transform the passive virtues, conventionally associated with them, patience, sacrifice, rectitude and suffering, into active ones and use them in the cause of the nation. Women, for Gandhi, were the ideal satyagrahis, natural political subjects in the Gandhian narrative of satyagraha. They were not to be bound by their domesticity, but neither were they to discard their duties. In effect, they were to assume responsibility for the nation, as they did for the home and family.

Periyar worked with and through different notions of identity and sexuality. For him the lowest of the low in caste society, adi dravidas and women, were the natural subjects of history. But their emancipation and self-fulfilment in history were possible only if the entire social order of caste was stood on its head. That is, Periyar did not trust to the enabling power of individual consciousness alone to bring about transformation. Consciousness was for him always already collective. Entire communities of the oppressed, all those non-brahmin communities which stood shamed and humiliated by brahminism and caste, and women everywhere, were to create their own history, by responding in anger, in defiance and in unison, in full knowledge of what held them in thrall to an unjust social order. On one hand, this meant a renunciation of caste with all its privileges, an abjuring of that religious faith which legitimised caste and a re-making of society along non-hierarchical lines. On the other hand this required a re-making of masculine and feminine subjectivities, so that the much desired self-respect, mutuality and freedom Periyar sought out as the defining premises of his utopia, could be grounded in primary human relationships. Thus, reason and critique, desire and freedom, mutuality and reciprocity constellated into a figuration for Periyar, in which could be traced those new structures of feeling he wished to cultivate in his fellow beings. For him, the emergence of a social order rested

as much on such structures of feeling, as they did on transformed material structures and social relationships.

We can make better sense of Periyar's complex utopian project by looking in some detail at how his self-respecters, especially women, understood and interpreted his ideas.

Women, caste and self-respect

Imprecations against caste and its attendant horrors were often the subject of many a woman self-respecter's addresses to conferences, as well as the articles several of them wrote for one or the other of the Self-Respect Movement's journals, *Kudi Arasu*, *Puratchi*, *Pagutharivu* and *Samadharmam*. Women understood caste as not merely a division of labour and labourers but as a system which divided women as well. Such a division secured for some women relative comfort and security, but also bound them to ignorance. So much so that these women persisted in thinking that they were better off than their lower caste, working class sisters. Women self-respecters were particularly critical of nationalist women in this regard and took great exception to their entreaties to women to abide by tradition and serve their nation. Commenting on a meeting of 'Indian Women' held in Madras, under the auspices of the Congress, a *Kudi Arasu* editorial wondered, mirroring, as it were, the ideas of women self-respecters, how educated, upper caste women could forget the fact of their subordinate existence and seek to perpetrate it by invoking conventional role models, such as Sita, Nalayini, Chandramathi and Vasugi; women, whose husband-worship can hardly be considered worthy of emulation (*Kudi Arasu*, January 22, 1933).

In another instance, Minakshi, a regular contributor to *Kudi Arasu* urged her nationalist sisters to practice a different sort of non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Rather than picket liquor shops and shops which sold foreign cloth, they would do well to picket and boycott the homes of those who oppose any and every move to a reform of women's lives; whether these have to do with the abolition of the 'devadasi' system or the rights to education and mobility of adi dravida women:

You may offer satyagraha, why your very life, for the sake of our devadasi sisters who are being coerced by their parents into the profession of their forebears. Offer satyagraha in front of the homes of your sisters who disdain to grant our adi dravida sister's rights of access to the common well . . . (*Kudi Arasu*, March 6, 1932).

Of lower caste women, it was said that their lot was toil. In a remarkable article titled, 'Women and Work', Neelavathi, a prominent speaker and writer in the Self-Respect Movement observed that if one were to leave aside the very rich and privileged amongst women, who lolled about all day long and idled their time away, the others worked—not merely at housework, but in "factories, hospitals, in the countryside . . . (in) tailoring, weaving, construction, vending . . ." Women, argued Neelavathi, were however denied the dignity of being workers, since society held that work was the mark of a man. Thus whatever women laboured at became theirs by destiny. For Neelavathi, it was important for women as well society to acknowledge their productive worth. Her plea that all women, except the idle few, be considered workers and accorded respect—and due wages, even for housework—represents a skilful deployment of Periyar's argument that all non-brahmins or 'shudras' ought to be considered workers by birth, since they were denied free and unrestricted access to all but the most menial of tasks in caste society (*Puratchi* April 29, 1934).

Periyar had noted: "Just as brahminism condemns a very large portion of the working population to shudrahood, so it has condemned women to the servitude of marriage" [Anaimuthu 1974: 178]. Neelavathi seeks to establish a homology between women condemned to housework and childbearing and yet denied the status of labourers, and shudras condemned to their caste status (and labour) and denied the identity of productive workers.

What is important to note here is that while women like Minakshi reminded their nationalist peers to be attentive to questions of caste difference and consider the problems faced by devadasis and adi dravida women as equally pertinent to the national struggle, as say the boycott of liquor shops, socialist-minded women like Neelavathi sought to remind all women of their common fate as workers in the family. The self-respecters acknowledged the fact that caste divided women and prevented them from

coming to terms with all those common modes of oppression to which they were subject under patriarchy. Yet they also knew that this divide cannot simply be wished away and that women had to consciously work at coming together, rather than assuming that they could, simply because they were sisters together in the nationalist struggle.

Women self-respecters resisted caste in other ways as well: by endorsing adi dravida rights—to temple entry, to a separate electorate, to learning; by supporting the demand for communal representation—for all non-brahmins in government and education—and by opposing and criticising the ideology of nationalism, as exemplified by Gandhi. Kujitham, an intelligent and well-read self-respecter met Gandhi, and questioned him closely about his views on varnadharma and caste. She was accompanied on that occasion by her husband, Gurusamy, and other self-respecters, all of whom were keenly interested in unravelling the tangle of piety, politics and pragmatism which lay at the heart of Gandhi's pronouncements and practice during this period (*Puratchi*, January 14, 1934). Neelavathi met with Gandhi during his visit to the Tamil country in 1934 and interrogated his faith in varnadharma, his views on the abolition of untouchability and the place he reserved for religion in public life (*Puratchi*, February 18, 1934).

It must be said here that many adi dravida women were active in the Self-Respect Movement. The most famous and visible amongst them was Anapoorani, an extremely well-read, articulate and daring woman who spoke out on a variety of matters, including atheism, the repression of caste and the rights of women. She married A. Rathinasabapathy, an upper caste non-brahmin, and a socialist by conviction. Their marriage was considered by the Self-Respect Movement to be a major victory over caste and orthodoxy. Rathinasabapathy was also in the forefront of the struggle against the subordination of women and wrote a fascinating novella, titled, *Yezhai Azhutha Kaneer* (The Tears of the Poor) (1932), which described a sort of dystopia, where men were punished for their sins towards women in the real world and cast into perdition and eternal suffering.

Perhaps the one significant practical act which enabled women self-respecters to speak out boldly against caste, nationalism and

patriarchy was the self-respect marriage. Largely inter-caste, or an instance of a widow marriage, and deliberately secular, dispensing, as it did, with the services of the brahmin priest, the self-respect marriage form announced to the world at large the arrival of a new sort of family: trans-caste and existing as the germ, the primary constituent of a new, equal community. By rendering marriage a matter of individual choice and desire, as well as a social contract, the self-respect marriage form made the caste Hindu family appear suddenly vulnerable. With women deemed free to marry whomsoever they wished to, the integrity of caste too stood challenged, since caste identity, centred in the woman's body and consecrated through strategies of control and discipline, could now be exchanged for one that the woman wished to create for herself—in freedom, in self-respect and on the basis of a chosen reciprocity.

Women self-respecters and their claims on reason

For women who, thus, opposed caste, their new sense of self came to hinge on two aspects of consciousness: Reason and mutuality. Reason was interpreted by women to mean an aspect of a probing, curious and active intelligence and one which would enable them to unravel the meaning of all those rituals, customs and everyday practices which bound them to a life of unknowing and domestic servitude. Reason was to enable them to question themselves and reflect on the choices they made, even if these happened to be merely quotidian ones. As Minakshi passionately expostulated in the course of her critique of civil disobedience:

Sisters, reflect for a moment on the horrors you endure in your day-to-day life. You borrow money—because you wish to observe a custom, practice a ritual, you borrow for a funeral, a pilgrimage. . . . Consequently poverty, humiliation, debt, police warrant, mortgage, the misery that visits your children, unbearable sadness and the rebuke of others, one follows the other. Why must you do this? To preserve a convention, an orthodox custom? To appear virtuous in the eyes of others? Do you not realise your [minds] are diseased . . . stricken with barbarity and afflicted with degenerate rituals . . . (*Kudi Arasu*, March 6, 1932).

More generally, women would uphold the claims of reason against the dictates of faith and religious norms and the rules of tradition. Thus, Ranganayagi Ammal, speaking at the Coimbatore district Self-Respect Conference observed with some exasperation that no longer can the orthodox and the learned afford to beguile women by repeating that 'Ignorance becomes a woman'; 'Do not heed a woman's words'; 'Silence is a woman's adornment'. Women were now ready to claim the powers of reasoning for themselves and were ready to examine not only literary opinions and reflections on women, but also inquire into those ill-opinions men held on women (*Puratchi*, November 26, 1933). But Rangammal writing in *Puratchi* drew attention to the wastefulness of religious festivals, of the debauchery which accompanied them and of the plight of young women in pilgrimage towns, especially during festival times, when they were teased and near molested by feckless and rude young men (*Puratchi*, January 28, 1934).

Such questionings of religion and faith—and these may be found in all self-respect magazines—were enabled and inspired by the Self-Respect Movement's general recklessness and courage with respect to matters of faith. Self-respecters were critical of all religions and refused to accept that religion and faith could help constitute a viable identity and community. For strategic reasons, and in particular contexts, as when Gandhi and Congress insisted that adi dravidas were also Hindus, Periyar exhorted the lower castes to convert to Islam and secure their freedom and self-respect in general Islamic brotherhood. But this was no general policy and at other times, Islam was as much criticized by the self-respecters as other religions. The practice of purda for instance, came in for a sustained critique and significantly enough, Islam's definition of female identity and freedom were debated vigorously by several Muslims. For example Aa Mu Mohammed Qasim Bhakavi wrote a long article in *Puratchi* titled 'Contraception and the Prophet' (*Puratchi*, December 24, 1933). Al-Haj Subahu Mo wrote an impassioned piece titled: 'Why Did Women Become Slaves? Muslim Women are also Slaves' (*Puratchi*, January 28, 1933). M.K.M. Khader wrote on how it was absolutely essential that women be liberated, if a socialist republic was to be established (*Puratchi*, April 15, 1934).

Such reasoned denunciations of religion helped constitute religious ideas and practices as legitimate objects of analysis by not merely civil society, but also the state. In fact, the trajectory of the self-respecters' critique of religion traced a curve which lead them, inevitably, as it were, to demand that the state intervene in matters of religious custom, when these proved demeaning to women. In such instances, the state appeared to the self-respecters as embodying an intelligence and a rationality, clearly different from and superior to the logic which informed religious rituals and practices. The self-respecters' support for the devadasi abolition bill is of particular interest in this respect.

The self-respecters objected to the devadasi system for several interlinked reasons. For one it seemed a deplorable instance of debauchery sanctified by the priest and the temple and rendered hoary by convention. Besides, the fact that devadasis were all inevitably from non-Brahmin castes and that they were consecrated as temple dancers, in service, not merely to the diety, but to the diety's patrons, be they brahmin priests or men of wealth, irked women (as well as men) self-respecters. Then, again, the system presented itself as a desirable vocation, so much so that women who felt 'dedicated' into it did not really seem to understand the vicious logic which held them captive. For women self-respecters, religion, caste and the claims of masculine sexuality seemed to exist in a complex and unholy articulation in the figure of the devadasi. Periyar himself held similar views and articulated them quite forcefully [Anaimuthu 1974: 170-73].

It is not to be wondered at then that women like Ramamrithammal, a devadasi who opted out of the devadasi system and joined the Self-Respect Movement, were driven to fair degrees of self-denial and self-loathing, as they spoke and wrote against a vocation which was not theirs by choice. Ramamrithammal wrote a novel, *Dasigalin Mosavalai* (The Devadasis' Web of Deceit) (1936), which warned ingenuous, but rich, young men of the lure and power of the dasi on one hand, and which reprimanded dasis for squandering their self-worth and their very lives for the love of lucre. The novel betrays a certain puritanical will to 'cleanse' the diseased devadasi of her powers of seduction and in doing so ends up blaming the victim, as much as the victimiser. Yet the

novel also makes it clear that within a system which chooses certain women to serve the lust of upper caste and wealthy men, and which sanctifies this choice as a god-given vocation, questions of female desire are inherently problematic: whether one damns the *dasi* or whether one calls attention to her 'autonomy', as some *dasis* did, during this period, not wanting to surrender their rights as 'nityasumangalis', and their conventional rights to property and ritual rights.

It was because they sensed the problematic nature of desire, rights and freedom, as these were understood and experienced by the *devadasi*, that self-respecters were convinced the rights of the *devadasi* cannot be thought through clearly within the confines of a system, which seemed to grant them sexual autonomy but which restricted them to the service of the powerful and wealthy. Thus they wished to do away with the system altogether and constitute these rights in a different context. This context was to be framed by the punitive powers of the state, which, as Periyar made clear, ought to be used to cleanse the body politic of social diseases, as well as by their vision of a new civil and social order [Anaimuthu 1974: 173–76]. In other words, the law was to guarantee and enforce rights which were to be grounded in everyday practices, in those new structures of feeling, the self-respecters looked to create and re-create.

For self-respecters, it must be pointed out here, reason and desire did not exist as polar elements in consciousness. Periyar wrote at length on how love and desire cannot be authenticated, except as aspects of well-thought out, reasoned choices. Otherwise, love seemed to him capricious, mere tomfoolery, an infatuation of the moment [Anaimuthu 1974: 180–84]. While he conceded that to desire is human and therefore, a crucial aspect of existence, and that there are no limits to freedom, autonomy and self-fulfilment, except those we set for ourselves, he held that in a social context, desire had to heed to norms of reciprocity and mutuality. Social restrictions and codes which forbade young widows from marrying again clearly went against the strictures of mutuality, for these codes allowed men to be polygamous, even as they imposed celibacy on women [Anaimuthu 1974: 134–39]. Likewise, social and religious norms which forbade a man and woman from

dissolving their marriage, were either of them unhappy, represented a travesty of the ideal of reciprocity which, as Periyar argued, ought to animate and ground conjugal good faith [Anaimuthu 1974: 146].

In matters such as those discussed above, we find Periyar and his self-respecters aligning the claims of desire to notions of freedom on one hand and to the arguments of reason on the other. Elsewhere, as with his criticisms of the ideal of female chastity, we find Periyar arguing against a sexual ethic which sanctioned legitimised male promiscuity, while reproving of and rendering illegitimate female desire. Marriage seemed to Periyar and others to capture best the sexual unfreedom thrust on women in the course of history, and in order to counter this state of existence, Periyar exhorted women to give into the claims of a free, self-validating desire, take on lovers, choose a life of economic self-sufficiency and abjure the responsibilities of motherhood [Anaimuthu 1974: 184–88]. Here, of course, desire assumes relevance as a counter-ideal, an imperative in itself. Yet, in this instance as well, it is the rational, directing intelligence, committed to rendering transparent a gross injustice, that propels desire. Freedom and the love of freedom were for Periyar always already rational choices, in that they can be defined and understood and not merely felt and experienced. By the same token, desire, as an adjunct of reason requires and is authenticated only by rational self-expression.

Women and the community of self-respect

Fighting caste and reasoning against faith, women self-respecters viewed themselves as the citizens of the future, as harbingers of the millennium. This millennial urge informed the movement's perceptions of itself to a great degree. Periyar and others often proclaimed themselves as revolutionaries who not only wished to stand caste society on its head, but who were doing so, in the knowledge that no one or no movement, since the time of the Buddha had attempted such a thing. For women, this millennial imagery translated itself as an invitation to citizenship, to a community of comrades. Even the self-respect marriage vow echoed the spirit of comradeship the self-respecters wished to consecrate:

Today our conjugal life that is based on love begins. From today I accept you, my dear and beloved comrade as my spouse, so that I may consecrate my love and co-operation for the cause of social progress, in such a manner as would not contradict your desires (*Kudi Arasu* 1974: May 11, 1929).

As we had remarked earlier, marriage interpreted in the self-respect fashion, ceased to mark the limits to domesticity, family and community and, in fact, enabled women (and men) to orient their life to ideas, to the world outside. As the life of Kunjitham and Gurusamy, as of several others, indicate, self-respecters defined their lives in terms of the world, rather than the self and family. Working as full-time propagandists and movement builders, who did not mind travel, dislocations of home and career, and yet bearing and raising children—with the active support of their spouses, women self-respecters lead a life, where neither conjugality nor motherhood exerted a dominant and determinate influence. Periyar's—and the movement's—endorsement of women's reproductive choice played no mean role in freeing women from the bind of motherhood, both as a set of practices and ideology. While the freedom from actual child rearing routines may have proved more illusive than real, except in rare instances, the mental and imaginative freedom which women experienced, thinking beyond motherhood, was experienced as very real by women. This freedom implied that women could talk, think and act on ideas that were far removed from the sphere of everyday life: they could debate politics, philosophy, faith, in fact, any and everything. This freedom also implied that women could look on their bodies as their own, as part of their being, so to speak. They could resist reification, either into chaste wives or devoted mothers and could think of themselves as sportswomen, adventurers, workers and thinkers. As a *Kudi Arasu* editorial noted, women needed new role models in place of old ones: rather than self-sacrificing pativratas, they needed to be like women of these modern times who had made a name for themselves in science, in education, in sports and in other feats of endurance (*Kudi Arasu* 1974: January 22, 1933).

Free to remake themselves in whatever manner they desired and tied to men in their lives through ties of mutuality, women acquired a new identity: that of the citizen, the women of civic

virtue, and one who could claim and act on an identity which did not subordinate her to men, nor define her as essentially different from them. While Periyar sometimes argued that women's reproductive functions restricted them from laying claims to complete autonomy in the present scheme of things (*Kudi Arasu*, August 12, 1928), he also insisted that motherhood could be rejected, in fact, ought to be disowned by women themselves, in favour of parenthood. As he observed:

We maintain that while it is the case women possess the attribute of bearing a child in their wombs for 10 months and eventually giving birth to it, this, in itself, does not make them different from men with respect to qualities such as anger, ruling power and strength. Likewise, we think that though men do not possess the [biological] means to get pregnant, it cannot be said they possess qualities different from women, in respect of calm, love and the power of nurture. If we are to value true equality—if there exists true love between man and woman—it is certain that all responsibilities except that of bearing a child should be considered common to both [Anaimuthu 1974: 121].

Convinced of women's rights to all that men had access to and claims on, and wanting to create social institutions which would enable women to share, or even lay aside the burden of motherhood, Girija Devi, a self-respecter and fiction writer, wondered if there should not be a special government department which would initiate such action, as would ensure the progress of women in all fields. Such a department, she reasoned, ought to be staffed only with women, who, initially could be nominated to office, but who would gradually be elected to their posts by an all women electorate. This department was to undertake practical tasks, of educating women, providing them with opportunities for earning their living, and most importantly, it was to aid and assist in matters of pregnancy and child birth (*Kudi Arasu*, January 10, 1932).

The notion of citizenship, as it was adumbrated and defined by self-respecters, for both men and women, was a complex one: it did not merely call for a legal identity, though this was implicit in the movement's struggle for the civil rights of women, *adi dravidas* and others who were denied rights to a self-respecting

existence. The Self-Respect Movement conceived of citizenship as the founding ideal of a new republic. It was to animate not merely claims made on the state, but on society as well; it implied and called forth a social commitment to the destruction of caste, wily faith and gender differences. Citizenship in this sense was to define new modalities of personal and social interaction, where self-respect and mutuality governed human relationships. It was to be expressive of new structures of feeling which implicated men and women in forms of communication that allowed for a felicitous and complex interplay between reason, emotion, desire, freedom on one hand and which established comradeship in love, as in politics, as the basis of the new community, on the other.

What was to be the relationship of citizenship to the economy? While self-respecters did deploy caste as a category of, what we would call, political economy, drawing attention to the manner in which one's caste status mediated one's access to work, education and social status, they did not think that economic exploitation stood to compromise a person's self-respect and rights, as much as did the oppressive power of caste. Besides, they defined the terms of power in caste society such that they could point out how the division which exists in this society, between those who carry out intellectual labour, and those who work with their hands, produce a surplus which is translated, not merely into material terms, but into symbolic and ritual terms as well. Knowledge, claimed and possessed exclusively by certain castes was to them as much a mark of exploitative social relationships, as were relationships of production. As far as women were concerned, they were as condemned in this system as the *adi dravidas*—into slavery and ignorance. As S. Ramanathan, a leading self-respecter, observed:

. . . because our forefathers held women as property, they had to create the phenomenon of untouchability to safeguard this property (*Kudi Arasu*, April 12, 1931).

Citizenship and utopia

In many ways, the Self-Respect Movement bears comparison with the women's movement. Like the self-respecters, feminists address consciousness, as much as they do structure and attempt constantly to work out the relationship between the two, unwilling as they

are to make the transformation of the one contingent on the transformation of the other. Feminist struggles in the interlinked realms of identity, community and comradeship, likewise, demand substantive changes in the content of human relationships, even as they seek formal guarantees for these changes in law. And, like the self-respecters, feminists seek to root changes, whether in structure or consciousness, in the everyday: in modes of address, attire, use of language, in forms of communication and in practices of everyday living. Just as how Periyar attempted to construct a non-brahmin historic bloc that could claim a shared and common identity in notions of self-respect and mutuality, so do feminists struggle to retain gender as a valid category for the coming together of women of different political persuasions and ideas. In both instances, the attempts have required an enormous amount of energy and imagination.

Given this homological relationship between two movements which were concerned with re-making the human subject of history, and given the fact that both have allowed themselves a great degree of political latitude in working out a politics of the possible, it seems important that we import lessons from the one into the other. In this context, I wish to look briefly at the debates which have grown around the demand, from various feminists and anti-feminist quarters, for a 'uniform' civil code. These debates bear a striking resemblance to those exchanges of 60 to 70 years ago and offer, on that account, a discursive and political context into which I wish to insert the legacy of the Self-Respect Movement. It seems to me that the movement possessed a notion of rights, claims and citizenship which was sensitive to differences, arising out of culture and community. Yet, it chose to understand these differences of caste and religion, in the context of a complex social system which deployed power and authority in ingenious ways to string them together in an unequal hierarchical social order. Thus it came to re-make society and re-deploy power in more democratic and dialogic ways and in doing so instructed a vision of gender justice which allowed women to dream of utopia. I am concerned here with feminist debates on the 'uniform' or, as some feminists term it a 'gender-just' civil code, which are interesting, embattled and even acrimonious.

Those who are hesitant in urging forth that the state work towards the making of such a code, point out that given the communalisation of our polity, and the fact that communal parties are also insisting the state legislate such a code into existence, feminist demands will eventually be co-opted into a communal agenda. Besides, if such a code were to actually be drawn up, it may serve to strengthen the intrusive powers of the state and render it more impervious to democratic demands and pressures. As it stands today, the law is not really effective or useful in solving problems relating to women's lives, and to demand a new piece of legislation may help to naturalise the fiction that changes in the law actually help to transform women's lives. Also, in a country whose peoples follow a bewildering array of customs, can one really and adequately define the nature, content and meaning of 'gender justice'; especially since, gender as a category exists and is in fact constructed only in articulation with a host of other social divisions and practices, such as those of class, caste and ethnicity. Proponents of this point of view argue that the more viable thing would be to suggest and ask for reform of personal and community laws.

Those who argue for a gender-just code point out that such a code will not really serve the purpose of communalists, since it will start out on premises which are essentially different from those which inform the communalist argument. For instance, they point to an existing draft (prepared by Forum Against Oppression of Women, Mumbai) and indicate that it not only re-defines marriage as a contract but also interprets the terms of conjugality completely differently. It is also argued that feminists who speak out in favour of a gender-just code are no more convinced of the efficacy of the law, as those who oppose it. But the demand for such a legislation is at least a step towards making the state a little more accountable to the plight of women living under different personal laws and suffering the discrimination and injustice all of them encode and practice. Besides, one may think of such legislation in terms of particular sorts of issues, such as to do with maintenance, guardianship and the right to freedom from domestic violence, rather than in terms of the proposed legislation's effect on community laws.

It is clear the second set of arguments are similar to those advanced by the self-respecters. They take as their starting point

female subjectivity as they imagine it ought to exist, and speak in the name of a free, autonomous and desiring subject, who is already disengaged from community and caste ties. Like the self-respecters, they locate their arguments in the future, in a utopia—the existing draft for a gender-just code is utopian—and consider the present as a phase which ought to be subjected to continual social criticism and critical action, so that the guarantees sought for in law may enable transformation in civil society as well. Just as how the self-respecters demands for interventionist legislation in the cause of the adi dravidas and women take meaning only in the context of their attempts to find and ground new structures of feeling in everyday life, so do these demands for a gender-just code make sense only in the context of an evolving, utopian feminist project. The point is the experiences of the Self-Respect Movement help in theorising the position of those feminists who are critical of and do not wish to ground identity in family and community, and who look to a comradeship to root a new and radical female subjectivity. They seem to suggest that a politics of identity need not always work from within already existing subaltern positions. It can also pitch its arguments in the future and in the present which is an anticipation of that future.

It is noteworthy that radical anti-caste movements, whether in Tamil Nadu or Maharashtra, have never shied away from the question of power, especially that embodied in the state and its laws. They have worked at ways and means of using, capturing and deploying that power. Besides, they represent a tradition of protest which refuses the very idea of identity as grounded in community, especially a community that is pre-given and which looks to leap out of it—into an imagined utopia. It is this radical future which I would like to restore to its rightful history, a history which, however, must be claimed and earned, rather than inherited.

References

- Anaimuthu, V. (ed) (1974): *Periyar E Ve Ra Sinthanaikal (Thoughts of Periyar)*—Three volumes, Sinthanaiyalar Kazhagam, Tiruchirapalli, (translations from Tamil have been made by the author of this paper).
- Ghosh, Suniti Kumar (1989): *India and the Raj 1919–1947 (1989): Glory, Shame and Bondage*, Vol. I, Prachi, Calcutta.

——— (1995): *India and the Raj 1919–1947* (1989): *Glory, Shame and Bondage*, Vol. II, Research Unit for Political Economy, Bombay.

Published in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 33, April 25, 1998, pp. 9–15.

Dr Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women *

ELEANOR ZELLIOT

My premises for this essay are that Dr B.R. Ambedkar's thought and action made important differences in the lives of Indian women in four ways. First, his movement and especially his organizations encouraged many Dalit women to become educated, to be active in public life, and especially to gain that all important quality of self respect and, in the contemporary period, encouraged women to form or to participate in organizations for Dalit Women on a state and national level. Second, this self respect, education and activity resulted even years after his death in a creative spirit which produced poetry, fiction and autobiography in extraordinary quality and quantity. Third, his concern for the status of all women is reflected in the Hindu Code Bill which he promulgated as Law Minister in Nehru's first cabinet and which eventually resulted in a more equal status for women in marriage, divorce, adoption practices, inheritance and property ownership.

The fourth category is more difficult to explain. As a historian, I am concerned that we recognize the essential quality of historical legitimization for change and that we recognize that change requires a philosophy that may be broader than the issue directly concerned. As an example of this philosophical legitimacy, let me refer to the final paragraph of a two page flier published in 1986 by the Bharatiya Mahila Jagriti Parishad (Indian Women's

*This essay was first presented as a paper at the conference, "Ambedkar in Retrospect" organized by S.K. Thorat at Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1998. It will appear in the conference volume to be published by Manohar in New Delhi.

Conference for Awakening). The two page litany of protest entitled "Dalit Women are Slaves of the Slaves" ends:

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar urged us to develop strength and struggle and to give up superstitious customs. He said, 'The appearance of Tulsi leaves around your neck will not relieve you from the clutches of the money lender. Because you sing songs of Rama you will not get concession of rent from landlords. You will not get wages at the end of the month because you make pilgrimages every year to Pandharpur. . . Do not believe in fate, believe in your own strength.'

The organization which published this is necessarily not anti-Hindu. The message here is that you can take your life into your own hands, that fate is not all powerful (itself a powerful message for women), and that Hindu beliefs should not hinder women's freedom. The other philosophical problem which must be examined is the link between patriarchy and caste, between the social system as a totality and the role of women. Dr Ambedkar began to explore this currently much debated issue. I will take up this problem in the final section of this essay.

Women activists in the Ambedkar movement

Women's action began quite early. Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar have investigated "Women in the Early 'Untouchable Liberation Movement'" and found pre-Ambedkar action to bring women out of the devadasi profession and find husbands for them as early as 1908.¹

At the Mahad satyagraha of 1928, an historic effort to get water from a public pond after the Bombay Legislative Council had declared all public places open to Untouchables, women not only participated in the procession from the conference site to the pond (where they were met by violence), they also "participated in the deliberations of the subject committee meetings in passing resolutions about the claim for equal human rights."² Women by the hundreds also participated in the five year long Nasik satyagraha to enter the Kalaram temple from 1930 to 1935, a massive effort that went on until Dr Ambedkar declared at Yeola near Nasik that he would "not die a Hindu" and all such efforts to enter the Hindu citadels ceased.

Women's conferences were held simultaneously with those of all the "Depressed Classes" in the early days, and then women met on their own. In May 1936, women held an independent conference to support Dr Ambedkar's declaration to convert. Pawar and Moon report the women expressed confidence that Ambedkar would not choose a religion that would make them live in purdah!³ One wonders if the place of women as well as the consideration of total commitment to social equality was a factor in the decision that led Ambedkar past Islam, and also past Christianity, Sikhism and various reform sects of Hinduism into Buddhism.⁴

Pawar and Moon report that resolutions of various conferences reveal that what women wanted was: free and compulsory education for girls (still not a fact in contemporary India); representation in legislative assemblies; self-protection such as karate (interestingly enough, the Girls' Hostel run by the Trilokya Bauddh Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG) in Pune teaches karate); a women's branch of the Samata Sainik Dal (equality volunteer corps), (and that now exists); and the prohibition of child marriages.⁵ When other castes were "sanskritizing" and adopting such older Brahmanical practices as child marriage and prohibition of widow remarriage, it is interesting that Ambedkar's followers opposed these practices. Ambedkar himself had been married at 13, so it is clear that such progressive reforms were part of a new movement, not the old Mahar pattern.

The Women's Conference during the Scheduled Caste Federation meeting of 1942 was a very important event. Ambedkar told the women that "your dress, your cleanliness and the confidence with which you behaved in the conference brought delight to my heart."⁶ Note that word *confidence*. Keer reports that Ambedkar's advice to the women on that 1942 occasion included injunctions to educate their children and remove from them any inferiority complex; not to have too many children; and to let every girl who marries "claim to be her husband's friend and equal and to refuse to be his slave."⁷ Sulochanabai Dongre of Amraoti, a very active center of reform, was the President of this conference and both Keer and the Pawar/Moon sources indicate quite a number of women leaders in the movement at this time.

Not enough research has been done on women and education in the Ambedkar movement to allow any sort of analysis, but Moon and Pawar report a girl's school in the Central Provinces in the 1920s and a girl's school begun by a woman, Jaibai Chaudhuri, in Nagpur in 1924.⁸ More recently, Shantabai Dani has done a great deal of educational work for women in Nasik. There are no separate figures for Buddhists in the Indian Census so we do not know how women in the Ambedkar movement today rank in literacy with other groups although we do know that Scheduled Caste women in general are much less literate than their caste Hindu sisters or their male caste fellows.

Women have continued to be part of demonstrations and the various campaigns of the Ambedkar movement. A moving illustration of this is in a poem by a Dalit woman. Jyoti Lanjewar, who participated in the long campaign to rename Marathwada University, now Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, paints a picture of a poor, probably illiterate, but passionately active woman in her poem *Ai (Mother)*. Her heroine, who is Every Buddhist Woman, is seen in the Namanter (change the name) campaign, this way:

I have seen you
At the front of the Long March
The end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist
Shouting "Change the name,"
Taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised hands
Going to jail with head held high. . .

And toward the end of her very moving poem is this passage on the *diksha bhumi*, the place of the Buddhist conversion, using "Baba" and "Bhim" as affectionate terms for Dr Ambedkar:

I have seen you on your deathbed
Giving that money you earned
Rag-picking to the *diksha bhumi*
Saying with your dying breath
"Live in unity . . . fight for Baba . . . don't forget him. . ."
and with your very last breath
"Jai Bhim." (Victory to Ambedkar)⁹

Women in the Ambedkar movement have also been active in other ways. An example of this is Meenakshi Moon's *Maitrani* which means "woman friend" in village Marathi and offers women (and sympathetic men) a chance to comment on religion and their social and political interests. Moon has also been involved in public meetings that bring to public attention women's concerns, give women a chance to meet other socially concerned women, and present as speakers both Dalit and non-Dalit women who are involved in women's activities.

Women who are part of the Ambedkar movement also participate in three women's organizations: the National Federation of Dalit Women, founded by Ruth Manorama in Bangalore and now about to open a North India branch; the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatna which has held meetings in Dhule and Nagpur and is open only to Dalit women; and the All India Dalit Women's Forum, established by a Buddhist woman from Pune, which is open to all women. These conferences offer fellowship and stimulation and also a chance to present women's demands. The National Federation of Dalit Women was represented at the International Women's Conference held in Beijing.

Vimal Throat reports that the National Federation of Dalit Women, as a coda to the Mahad Conferences of 1927, which are seen as the real beginning of the Ambedkar movement, has called for Dalits to gather at Mahad again on December 25, 1998. Just as the Mahad Conference of December 25, 1927, burned those portions of the *Manusmriti* which limited the rights of Untouchables and legalized extreme punishments for any supposed transgression, the Mahad Conference of December 25, 1998 will find women in the thousands burning the *Manusmriti* for its denial of human rights to women.

An area that has not yet been fully explored involves all the "Mahila Mandals" (women's organizations) that dot the localities of Buddhists across the urban face of Maharashtra. Some of these groups concentrate on Buddhism, some organize classes for literacy or some skill such as typing. They are purely local and locally organized, and their strength depends upon the individual commitment of women. Gopal Guru reports that Mahila Mandals have

proliferated even in the villages of Akola district. In the post-Ambedkar period women have been creating songs which reflect their feeling about Ambedkar, about politics, about Brahmins, and this creative urge has led to cultural programmes with Buddhist motifs. He also notes that Mahila Mandals besides staging cultural programmes at the *diksha bhumi* (place of conversion) in Nagpur and the *chaitya bhumi* in Mumbai (Ambedkar's final resting place), have resulted in some Dalit women performing their cultural programme on Mumbai T.V.¹⁰

After recounting all this activity, I must inject one note of failure into the story. We must note that women do not play an important role in political leadership in Maharashtra. Aside from Shantabai Dani, one cannot point to a truly important female figure. Perhaps it might be noted that a radical Brahman woman, Neelham Gorhe, was associated with Prakash Ambedkar's branch of the Republican Party for a brief period. I will not analyze this lack of women's political power except to say that women in Maharashtra have achieved a political place only in Socialist and Communist parties, and that rarely. But I might point out that Mayavati, a Chamar schoolteacher, has achieved extraordinary political power in Uttar Pradesh through the Bahujan Samaj Paksha (BSP). As an essential part of her programme, she promoted the creation of Ambedkar statues and parks in every possible area of that state, and designated "Ambedkar villages" which had large Dalit populations to receive special help.

Dalit women in the field of culture

The poem fragments by Jyoti Langewar and the notes on songs above lead us into a post-Ambedkar development in which women have made extraordinary progress. I think the most important new element in the thirty year history of Dalit Sahitya (the literature of the oppressed) is the entrance of a number of women as writers and poets. Urmila Pawar has been very successful as a short story writer, and has represented Marathi literacy ideas at international conferences. Jyoti Langewar, Hira Bansode, Surekha Bhagat, Pradnya Lokhande and Mina Gajbhiye are published poets. Two minimally educated Dalit women, Bebi Kamble and

Shantabai Kamble, have published their autobiographies and Bebi's is excerpted as an example of Marathi literature in *Women Writing in India*, the major collection of women's writing. Shantabai Dani, educator and political and social activist based in Nasik, has also written the story of her life as has Savita Ambedkar, Ambedkar's second wife known as *Mai*. As an example of the contribution women have made and as a tribute to the power of Dr Ambedkar's life and thought in their lives, here is Hira Bansode's poem about Ambedkar. Its thrust is to ridicule those who pay tribute to him now but opposed him during his lifetime. Note that Bansode writes as a follower of Ambedkar with no particular feminine interest, although perhaps that sarcastic last line of each verse sounds like a woman's scorn for hypocrisy:

○ Great Man (Mahapurush)

○ Great Man—

those who strewed thorns in your path
today offer you flowers
and sing your praises
—now this is really too much—

During the dark procession of time
you lit the flowers of light
but these imposters, these villains
crushed, extinguished those flowers.
Today those flowers of light have turned into a wildfire
and those villains are fanning that wildfire
—○ now, this is too much—

Like an elephant ramming a gate
you pounded on the temple door,
the stones of the temple shook.
Under the holy name of religion
they long ago enslaved the gods.
Your honest painful claim
of the right to see the gods
was demolished, thrown out of the village.
Now they decorate the great tree

that sprouted on that spot
—now this is really too much—

It is clear that nature belongs to all
but these people bought that too.
Every drop of water in Chowdar Tank
was stamped with their name;
the alert watchman of this culture
guarded the imprisoned water.
They feared that your touch would poison the water and
they anointed you with your own blood
when you were dying of thirst.
And now they pour water
into the mouth of your stone effigy
—oh now this is too much—¹¹

Chowdar Tank is the body of water in Mahad from which Ambedkar and the Mahad conference attendees of 1927 attempted to drink. Driven away violently, they returned in December 1927 to burn the *Manusmriti*. Bansode's poem illustrates the centrality of Mahad in the Ambedkar movement and sheds light on the new women's movement's intent to return to that place in protest of Manu's tradition. There are many other poems, often offering up new ideas and images, rigorous criticism of the community itself, perhaps some subtle anti-patriarchal ideas. And there is one creative act which goes beyond publishing and singing. Dr Padmavathi of Andhra Pradesh took seven years of her life, leaving her clinic and her son in the care of her husband, and created a full length feature film on the life of Dr Ambedkar. Its language is Telugu so it has won honours only in that language area, but it exists in video form with English subtitles as a remarkable tribute to Ambedkar and to the creative ability of Dalit women.

The Hindu Code Bill

Even before the Hindu Code Bill was on the mind of legislators, Dr Ambedkar supported legal measures to aid women. In 1928 as a member of the Legislative Council of Bombay, he supported "vehemently"¹² the bill for maternity leave for working women and felt the financial responsibility should be on both the employer

and the government. He also supported equal wages for women.

Volume 14 of *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* carries as its forward a statement by Ambedkar on the significance of the Hindu Code:

No law passed by the Indian Legislature in the past or likely to be passed in the future can be compared to it [Hindu Code] in point of its significance. To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex, which is the soul of Hindu society, untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attached to the Hindu Code.¹³

These are strong words, and they underwrite my point that gender inequality is related to other forms of inequality, a matter to be pursued on the final section of this paper, as well as illustrating the commitment Dr Ambedkar brought to the consideration of the Hindu Code Bill in the Indian parliament.

Dr Ambedkar himself gives the history of the bill. It had its origin in the 1937 legislature and from that time on the various provisions were "bandied from committee to committee." In 1941 the Rau Committee reported on the Women's Rights to Property Act of 1937. In 1942 two draft bills, one on succession, one on marriage were presented. A Hindu Succession Bill was introduced in the Assembly in 1943 but referred to a Joint Committee. (It should be noted that for the purposes of this Code, people who were not Muslims, Parsis or Christians were included in the category of Hindu.)¹⁴

The parliament of Independent India settled down to consider the Hindu Code Bill in 1950. The failure of the bodies above to finalize a bill was to be repeated in the lengthy discussions of 1950 and 1951. As Law Minister, Ambedkar was in charge of presenting the facets of the Bill, explaining the rationale of various sections, answering questions, and especially defending the very idea of equality for women in marriage, divorce, adoption and property rights. He and his many supporters, including all the women in the legislative body, were faced with a barrage of criticism. Among the objections to the bill which were raised were such statements that "ladies will be reduced from being an Alexander in the home

to being a mere partner";¹⁵ and a host of other ideas: the Code should apply to Muslims also; it is worded dictatorially; it should be submitted to all India in referendum; Sikhs find it regressive; Ambedkar does not have a mandate; "we do not want Ambedkarian religion;"¹⁶ custom should dominate over law; there will be nothing but litigation; "Ambedkar has been egged on by aggressive ladies."¹⁷ Ambedkar himself noted that the Hindu Code Bill was introduced in the parliament on 11th April 1947 and after a life of four years, it was "killed and died unwept and unsung, after four clauses of it were passed."¹⁸ Ambedkar himself resigned in 1951, the failure of the Prime Minister to support the final passage of the Hindu Code being one of his major reasons.

In the end the Hindu Code Bill was for the most part passed bit by bit in 1955 and 1956, but as Acts, not the total Bill. Among its provisions are guarantees of property from the paternal home to daughters; abolition of caste in the matter of marriage and adoption; the principle of monogamy; the principle of divorce. What I want to stress here, however, is Dr Ambedkar's commitment to female equality and to legal measures to help women. Often he spoke of a particular measure by using examples of women's worthiness or international practices. For instance, during the fierce battle over women's property (in which one argument was that the joint family would be destroyed and another that women were incapable of good judgement in this matter) he said:

I know a great deal of the argument that is always urged against women getting absolute property. It is said that women are imbecile; it is said that they are always subject to the influence of all sorts of people. . . My submission to the House is this. If the woman can be trusted to dispose of her *stridhamam* property (marriage gifts) in the best ways she likes. . . if in certain cases women were competent and intelligent to sell and dispose of their property, they must be held to be competent in respect of the disposal of the other property also.¹⁹

Also in the matter of women's property, he noted that various systems of inheritance had been examined and "there is no system anywhere in the world where a daughter has been excluded."²⁰

There were a few fairly light moments in the discussions. Pandit Lakshmi Kanta Maitra explained why he could not support the

code: "I am a married man. I have a humble wife—married according to Hindu shastric rites,—a simple, unsophisticated lady, bred up and nurtured in the ideals of our Hindu homes." And Ambedkar interjected, "What a pity!" He was immediately besieged with opinions that 99.9 per cent of Hindu homes have that kind of wife and are happy.²¹ It was in these meetings that N.V. Gadgil suggested Ambedkar himself was of the race of Manu and Yagnavalkya, great rishis of the past, and Shri Syamnadan Sahaya called Ambedkar the "Kaliyugi Manu."²² And it was also during this time that Ambedkar made one of the few jokes that is recorded: He wished he could find some fat Brahmin women to sit fasting in front of Parliament until the Hindu Code Bill was passed!!

As these notes show, the debate over the Hindu Code Bill was at times very personal. It is clear, however, that the basic objections were not directed against Ambedkar but against the idea of women's property rights, their right to divorce, the abolition of caste in the matter of marriage and adoption, and the prescription of monogamy. Reading the two thick volumes of debate gives one an impression of a very intelligent, well informed only occasionally impatient Ambedkar in battle with a vocal minority whose fear of change was emotional and often irrational. That there are new laws eventually prescribing women's rights is a tribute to Ambedkar, to the slow influx of new ideas, and to the women who spoke strongly for their sisters in Parliament and out.

Ambedkar seems to have entered the debate with great optimism: "Society has never accepted its own power and its own responsibility in molding its social, economic and legal life. It is for the first time that we are persuading Hindu Society to take this big step and I have not the slightest doubt in my mind that a society which has bucked up courage enough to tolerate the large step that we are asking it to take by reason of this Bill, will not hesitate to march on the path that remains to be trodden and reach the goal that she [Mrs. Hansa Mehta] has in mind." This early optimism was not to last, but it demonstrates Ambedkar's commitment to women's rights and the linkage of women's rights with social justice.

The broader context of women's empowerment

At the beginning of this essay I noted the relationship between broader social ideas and the empowerment of women in the flier which advised women to reject faith in fate and take their lives in their own hands. The major arena, however, which must now be explored is that of patriarchy and caste. Gabriele Dietrich has pointed out what she sees as Ambedkar's place in the debate: "Ambedkar, though aware of women's position in general, has not integrated his analysis of caste with an analysis of patriarchy. He confines himself to general observations like the following: 'From time immemorial man, as compared with woman, has had the upper hand. He is a dominant figure in every group and of the two sexes has greater prestige. With this traditional superiority of man over woman, his wishes have always been consulted. Woman, on the other hand, has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions, religious, social or economic. But man, as a maker of injunctions, is most often above them all.'²⁴

Dietrich continues with her analysis of Ambedkar's ideas: "While he sees a connection between social evils like *sati*, child marriage, ban on widow remarriage, caste and untouchability, his preoccupation is clearly with untouchability and caste. Yet, his writings are not only relevant to rethink drastically on racial theories of invasion, they also lend themselves for drawing further connections between caste and patriarchy and also for critical introspection, both among feminists and Dalits." Dietrich in conclusion pleads for "drastic rethinking" in the Dalit movement on patriarchy.²⁵

Ambedkar was ahead of his time in his thinking about women's empowerment, as a close reading of the debates surrounding the Hindu Code Bill will show, and it is perhaps enough that he pointed out the relationship between the caste system and the position of women. Hierarchy in a social system is reflected in hierarchy in the home. Rights and special privileges for one caste can be translated into rights and special privileges for one gender. The hegemony of caste translates into a hegemony of gender through codes of pride, privilege, and self image. The necessity for a son in the continuance of the male line, which is related to

caste, calls for the lessened importance of daughters. Ambedkar stood for annihilation of caste itself, and chose a religion which stresses rationality, equality and humanity for himself and any who felt it offered personal and societal freedom. But these simple statements reveal just a bit of the "interface between caste, patriarchy and gender" to use Dietrich's words. It is up to those of us who think best theoretically to more thoroughly explore this issue. It is up to Dalit women themselves to explore ways to control the patriarchy they face both within and without the Dalit family. It is up to all who care about human rights to work for freedom, equality and justice for women.

Notes

1. Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar, "We Made History Too: Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement," in *South Asia Bulletin* 9:2, 1989: 68-71.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
4. In *The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman*, first published in *Mahabodhi* in 1950 and then as a separate pamphlet. Dr Ambedkar lists all of the many women of early Buddhism, analyzes why the order of nuns is subject to the order of bhikkhus, and affirms his belief that women were equal to men in the eyes of the Buddha.
5. Moon and Pawar, *op.cit.*, p. 69.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
7. Dhananjay Keer, *Dr Ambedkar Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991 reprint, p. 352.
8. Moon and Pawar, *op.cit.*
9. The poem appears in full in "Stri Dalit Sahitya: The New Voice of Women Poets," in *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Religion and Society*, edited by Anne Feldhaus. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
10. *Dalit Cultural Movement & Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra*, Mumbai: Vikas Adhayn Kendra, 1997, pp. 25-29.
11. From Phiyadi. Pune: Samaj Prabodhan Sanstha Prakashan, 1984. First published in Bombay, *Sakal*, 16 April 1980.
12. "Women's Liberation in India & Dr B.R. Ambedkar by R.D. Sonker (typescript).
13. These volumes are edited by Vasant Moon and published by the Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.
14. *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Volume 14: Part One and Two: The Hindu Code Bill, edited by Vasant Moon and published by the Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 1995; pp. 37-40.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 910.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 1079.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 891.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 1324.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 405.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 1298.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
24. Gabriele Dietrich, "Dalit Movements and Women's Movements" in *Reflections on the Women's Movement in India*, New Delhi: Horizon India Books, 1992, p. 89.
25. *Ibid.*

Dalit Women in Western Ethnography

A Review of *Siva and Her Sisters**

MARY E. JOHN

Especially since the invention of fieldwork, western ethnographers have been expected to provide their readers with unique insights into how other cultures are different. In recent years, however, many aspects of ethnographic practice including the notion of cultures as bounded wholes, the relations between anthropologists and informants, the west and its 'others'—the politics of representation, in other words—have been thrown into question.

The book under review, part of a series of 'Studies in the Ethnographic Imagination', is innocent of all such soul-searching and favours an ostensibly direct, more or less unmediated encounter with the men and women of Aruloor, pseudonym for a village in the eastern part of Tiruchi district in Tamil Nadu. The special focus is on the experiences of dalit women (the author's terms being 'untouchable' in quotations, or pallar women). Karin Kapadia points out that such a focus has been largely absent in the anthropological literature; more important, though, is the analytical weight she places on her perspective. She seeks to show, first, that it is impossible to deal with class and caste as categories without incorporating the dynamics of gender: and second; that pallar women (unlike their sisters among the brahminical elites) possess a certain cultural autonomy which makes them "women of great resourcefulness, independence, courage and warmth" (p. 8).

* *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India* by Karin Kapadia; Westview, Boulder, 1995, pp. xv+269.

These are very important and somewhat different claims, and I will discuss them by paying attention to the frames employed in Kapadia's study, since it is these frames which lend her analysis intelligibility. The book itself is divided into three parts. Though the overall logic of the chapters is never explicitly explained, I take it that each of these parts corresponds broadly to what would be the more conventionally recognizable domains of gender, caste and class, respectively. The first and longest part begins by laying out the categories of kinship prevalent amongst different castes in Aruloor, with a special emphasis on matrilineal kin and the unique functions of the mother's brother. Subsequent chapters in this section take on the critical place of the institution of marriage, the practices of astrology and puberty rituals and the significance of goddess possession.

In each case, Kapadia structures her argument by drawing a clear line between non-brahmin (sometimes called 'Tamil') and brahmin values, symbols, discourses and worlds. Thus, according to Kapadia, it is only brahmins who strongly stress male patri-lineage, whereas matrilineal kin are the most important source of material and emotional support amongst the other castes. The sharpest contrast emerges from her interpretations of the meanings and, indeed, the experience of puberty for different women. Over against the public festivity, auspiciousness and sense of generative power that attaches to the seclusion of non-brahmin girls at the onset of their first menstruation, Kapadia sets off the impurity and inauspiciousness surrounding brahmin girls at this time. The brahmin girl "temporarily becomes 'untouchable'" (p. 118) even as the 'untouchables' themselves are busy celebrating and commemorating the occasion in the grandest manner.

Part two of the book consists of just a short single chapter and looks at how gender and sexuality are affected by caste. Kapadia sees the control of women's fertility as being more central amongst lower castes, while female sexuality and chastity are primary preoccupations for upper castes, a norm that is emulated by upwardly mobile lower caste groups.

Part three discusses the spheres of work and production relations. Proletarianization has grown amongst the agricultural pallars and only middle castes have seen some of the benefits of land

legislation, thus underscoring the ongoing correlation between untouchability and landlessness. Equally crucial are the effects of the technological changes in capitalist agriculture on the gendered divisions of labour and disparities in wage rates. With mechanization having displaced pallar men from their major agricultural task of ploughing, pallar women now have more work available to them than men, which greatly adds to these women's already existing burdens and responsibilities as the family's primary providers. Kapadia ends her study with nuanced descriptions of the complex combination of competition and solidarity characterizing pallar women's working relationships with one another as they struggle to survive. Strategies of self-discipline and harsh exclusivist norms of competence coexist with the pursuit of collective interests through successful demands for higher wage rates during periods of peak employment.

This is obviously a wide-ranging book. Clear and useful connections between gender, caste and class are often foregrounded. However, in spite of such strengths, the unreconstructed anthropological frames Kapadia employs—such as those of 'kinship', 'the village', and 'culture' are problematic and severely limit her analysis.

Thus, for instance, it is unclear why the important discussions about marriage are so tightly contained within the domain of kinship. It is well known that kinship studies no longer enjoy a central place in the discipline of anthropology, having been effectively critiqued by major anthropologists themselves. Instead of proclaiming that "marriage is what Tamil kinship is all about" (p. 19), it would have been more productive, it seems to me, to release marriage from the confines of kinship terminology into a broader framework that would be more capable of conceptualizing the contemporary pressures facing this critical institution. It is only as a tailpiece that we are told about the ambiguous, if not negative relation to marriage that is held privately by women from different castes, given all the tangible and intangible inequalities that structure everyday relations between husbands and wives. Since Kapadia sets up traditional kinship ties as the norm contemporary practices, such as marrying non-kin, or worst of all, "marrying money" become in the nature of a falling away, modern

impurities to be lamented rather than analyzed in their own right.

In different ways, the 'village' and 'culture' also become boundaries that contain and render inflexible what might otherwise be open to a different dynamic. Caste appears to be set in stone, not unlike the separate streets in which the brahmins, chettiers, muthurajahs, Christians and pallars of Aruloor live. Though Kapadia's rebuttal of the Dumontian worldview of an encompassing brahminical discourse accepted by all castes is effective, the historical dimensions of caste struggle are all but absent. The anti-brahmin movement is mentioned at the end of the rather odd chapter comprising part two of the book, but it is never engaged with. This has to be a serious omission when Aruloor clearly depicts the effects of earlier decades, both in the less articulate forms of everyday resistance and in more conventionally politicized party positions.

A pronounced tendency amongst western feminist ethnographers is their general unawareness of feminist activism or scholarship in the country they are studying. The lone, somewhat dismissive reference to the "urban brahmin elites . . . in the forefront of women's emancipation" (p. 163) is not an inaccurate description. But this does not mean that no relevant work has been done in the areas that Kapadia covers. The last section of the book on work suffers especially from such disregard. Since the 1970s in India, considerable efforts have gone into improving the measurement of female labour participation rates, understanding the complex and contradictory relations between poverty and the sex ratio, right up to effecting changes in both the NSS and census definitions of work. Therefore, Kapadia's admonitions at the close of her last chapters that "policymakers and planners" should take note of the plight of pallar women are somewhat off the mark in making the assumption that such issues have not been raised before. Indeed, if anything, we are beset by the opposite problem of having to fight off the recommendations of 'gender and poverty' studies on India being produced by agencies like the World Bank, who are able to annex prior feminist work to very different ends.

This also means that it is not simply a matter of making connections between caste, class and gender. A strong underlying theme throughout the study is that gender relations are more

egalitarian amongst lower castes, and become increasingly unequal as one moves up the caste hierarchy, implying therefore that "the status of women falls, when that of their husbands rises" (p. 251). I think this is a conceptually and politically misconceived way of stating the problem. When pallar men, as Kapadia herself notes, are unable to be providers, in other words, are unable to be 'men', it does not make much sense to romanticize pallar women's greater value, freedom or resourcefulness. It is also not at all self-evident why the withdrawal of upwardly mobile women from back-breaking vulnerable labour in the fields to work within the home should imply nothing other than a loss of status. Clearly our middle class conceptions of gender equality have to be bent and broken in order to make more room for the gendered dimensions of caste and class. Western ethnographers may also have to shed their somewhat patronizing assumptions about modernity in India, in order to appreciate the dilemmas as well as the possibilities of dalit and women's struggles at this time.

Published in Economic and Political Weekly, 24 February, 1996.

Caste and Women*

LEELA DUBE

This essay explores the relationship between caste and gender: it examines the way caste impinges on women's lives and explores the role of women in maintaining and, to some extent, changing caste. The exercise requires us to situate women as conscious acting subjects of social relationships and processes that constitute, reproduce and modify the social system characterized by the institution of caste.¹ Equally, we need to consider the determinate ways in which women are objectified and become instruments in—even as they introduce flexibility to—the structures and processes implicated in the reproduction of caste. The discussion focuses on three interrelated, indeed overlapping, themes—occupational continuity and the reproduction of caste, food and rituals, and finally, marriage and sexuality.

The three basic characteristics of caste, typified as *jati*, a birth-status group, are exclusion or separation (rules governing marriage and contact, which maintain distinctions of caste), hierarchy (the principle of order and rank according to status), and interdependence (the division of labour which is closely tied to hierarchy and separation).² These three analytically separable principles of the caste system operate not so much through individuals as through units based on kinship. The maintenance of rules of behaviour and actions specific to one's *jati* and the patterns of interaction with other birth-status groups, for instance, critically

* I thank Saurabh Dube for discussion and editorial help. The list of references at the end of this paper includes certain entries which have not been cited in the text or notes but have gone into the making of its argument.

centre on kinship units, particularly the family and the household. We find then that the punishment for transgression of rules and norms of caste leads to the ostracism of the domestic group of the offender unless s/he is disowned by the household.³ Women's lives are largely lived within familial parametres. The centrality of the family and the household in their lives cannot therefore be over-emphasized.

Similarly, when we turn to the material bases of caste, the most important form of inequality in the caste system, the unequal distribution of resources and exploitative relations of production, can be understood only through an enquiry into the principles of kinship governing allocation of resources, devolution of rights to property, rights to services, and entitlements. A jati or caste group then functions through its constituent familial units or large-scale kinship units. It is not the jati as a whole but the lineages or familial units which hold material resources. This has crucial implications for gender since within these units there are clear distinctions in respect of the rights and entitlements of their male and female members. Thus, if endogamy has the potential for raising one's family status through the forging of appropriate marital links, it can also initiate a tight squeeze by restricting marital choices and putting pressures for material resources for a daughter's wedding.

Occupational continuity

Women's work contributes substantially to the occupational continuity of a caste group. It is, of course, true that the growth of new professions and open recruitment to occupations have been important aspects of social change in Indian society. The picture of inalienable unchanging links between traditional occupation and caste was, in any case, vastly overdrawn. At the same time, there are significant continuities in the link between caste and occupation. Agriculture—although now open to all castes—still gives a distinct identity to a large number of castes of 'traditional' cultivators. Equally, some other occupations remain the exclusive privilege of particular castes. A Brahmin, for instance, still performs the functions of the purohit (priest), for upper and middle level castes. Among artisan castes of goldsmiths, blacksmiths, potters and weavers, a few members of the group at the very least are

imparted the necessary skills, and make a living by the traditional craft. Finally, most ritually polluting occupations—the curing and tanning of hides, the removal of dead animals, scavenging, and the activities of the barber, the washerman, and the midwife—retain their association with specific castes.

In these occupations, closely tied to caste, the work of women, carried out as members of households—the basic units of production—is indispensable. It is difficult for weavers and potters to carry on the complex processes of their craft without the continuous help of the women and children of the household, who in turn have well-defined tasks. Women can also take on aspects of men's work: it is not unusual for women from a potter's family to establish contacts with clients and go to the market to assist with the selling of goods. Similarly, basket weaving is a joint activity of men and women. In horticulture, women often carry the major burden of work. In rural areas and small towns it is common for women from households of petty traders and shopkeepers to grind spices and prepare fries, fritters and preserves for sale in the family shop. Despite regional variations, these illustrations underscore the fact that occupational continuity in a large measure depends on women. It is telling that a man who runs away with another man's wife is censured for both 'breaking another man's cooking pot' and 'breaking a household'. The forsaken husband, after all, is left without help to carry out the business of living.

Jajmani relations, short term contractual affiliations between artisans and service castes and landowners, cultivators and traders, and relations of exchange among occupational castes, a feature of many rural and semi-urban areas, function once again at the level of the family. Both men and women render services and receive remuneration—in cash and kind—for their work. Among service castes such as barbers and washermen, women's work in relation to the jajman's family is, indeed, well defined. To the north of the Vindhyas a barber woman renders personal services to the women of the jajman's family—or a family which engages the barber woman on cash payment—which include the cutting of nails, the decoration of feet (with special coloured solutions), a special oil massage and a bath for a new-born baby and its mother, the

supplying of leaf cups and leaf plates for feasts, and the role of companion to the bride during the wedding ceremony. In Chhattisgarh, a Raot (grazier and water-carrier) woman has an important supportive role to play during feasts and ceremonies, bringing water, washing utensils, and grinding spices and soaked pulses for preparing fries and fritters. The castes of both the barber and the water-carrier help in preparing pakka food on ceremonial occasions. In the south, a washer-woman's ritual functions are indispensable for the washing of soiled clothes during the ceremony that goes with the first menstruation. In every region there are specific 'Untouchable' castes whose women work as midwives: these women, along with the men of their caste, share the essential task of removing pollution of upper and clean castes. Finally, in many parts of the country, the bond or contract which ties labourers to their masters is understood to include the services of both the husband and the wife.⁴

The cultural recognition of the significance of women's work in the continuity of caste-linked occupations is clear. At the same time, in order that women pursue these traditional occupations, they have to be trained in them from childhood and have to be socialized into accepting them as proper work which, within limits, is 'destiny'. It has been found that parents may restrict the education of girls to avoid a potentially uncomfortable situation in which the daughter develops a distaste for the traditional occupation of her caste. It then becomes difficult to get her married into an appropriate family. Not formal education, but the capacity and willingness to do traditional work tends to make a girl useful in the husband's family. The necessity of continuing with occupational work is an important basis for marrying within the caste. It is understandable then that a landowning cultivator family of the Kunbi caste in rural Maharashtra should be unhappy when one of its sons, after acquiring education, decides to marry an educated Brahmin girl. What use would she be in an agriculturist's family? Would she be able to call her husband's home her own? Even home-based work linked to cultivation is seen as outside the arena of her experience and below her status.

In situations of change, women often have to take on the responsibility for continuing caste-based occupations and maintain-

ing the household. When men give up their traditional occupation on account of its low ritual status or inadequate returns, the entire burden of occupational work often falls on the women. Many men migrate to towns leaving behind their families. Women continue their contribution in terms of services or craft, but for want of male help they face the choice of losing their clientele or coping with a doubled work burden. Middlemen intervene. Wives of migrant men often have to work under the authority of their husband's kin who surround them within the neighbourhood and locality. Thus, women's contribution to occupational continuity is carried out within patrilineal limits and under the impositions and controls of caste.

In a study of scavenger women conducted in Delhi, Karlekar (1976) found that while men were increasingly leaving the ritually 'defiling' occupation of their caste, women remained in the same traditional field. These women had to support the males of the household who were trying to acquire skills for entering new occupations, or explore independent sources of income. The men, even when unemployed, were loath to touch their traditional work. Boys were being sent to school while girls joined their mothers at work at an early age. Similarly, the Padyachi and Nadar families from Tamil Nadu who come to Delhi in search of employment have their women take up work as domestic helps in private homes for washing clothes and utensils, and cleaning the house. It is held that in difficult times women, since they are used to doing domestic work for their own household, can do similar kind of work for others. The men, on the other hand, generally consider it below their dignity to do such jobs. In the absence of regular employment, even odd jobs are preferred to domestic work. Among these migrant groups women are often the principal supporters of the family: women's experience of multifaceted housework become the basis for maintaining the household. The controls are retained. Social and ritual matters are discussed and decided upon by the males of the caste within the neighbourhood.

Food and rituals

A jati or caste has a distinctive culture, a certain commonality that imparts a sense of identity to its members. These cultural

practices in turn are learnt largely within the family and kinship networks. Modes of worship, fasts and festivals, rules governing concerns of purity and pollution, and the organization of space, constitute interrelated and intermeshed elements which impart commonality and identity to members of a caste. While some of these features are shared by other castes in the same region or caste groups of the same varna category across regions, it is, in fact, the specific configuration of these elements and features within a particular caste that serves as its mark of distinction. Practices relating to food form an important mediating relational idiom within this matrix.

Food constitutes a critical element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. Its centrality extends to both the attributional and transactional dimensions of caste. In other words, both the exclusiveness of castes as bounded entities and inter-caste relationships are articulated by the idiom of food. Women, key players in the process of socialization, are also the principal protagonists in this arena. The task of safeguarding food, averting danger, and in a broad sense attending to the grammatical rules which govern the relational idiom of food, falls upon women. There is relaxation in the public arena but home is still the custody of women.

The concerns of purity and pollution centering on food begin at home. The principles of caste involve a clear distinction between the domestic space/home and the 'outside' world. Women play the key role in maintaining the sanctity and purity of the home. Notions of safety relating to both purity/pollution and the 'evil eye' entail a variety of restrictions and constraints on women in the tasks of processing, preserving, cooking and distributing food. These injunctions pertain to specific observances relating to the maintenance of the required level of purity of the body, the division of space for practices of cooking and consumption of food and the preservation of traditions in regard to caste-linked prescriptions and proscriptions about different foods.⁵ Foods are hierarchically classified in terms of intrinsic purity and impurity, vulnerability and resistance to pollution, and in terms of specific characteristics they embody—passion, anger, calm, strength, spirituality. Foods then are substances which carry the capacity to affect and transform the person who consumes them. The responsibility

for who eats what, where and when, falls upon women within the domestic space. Women's practices in relation to food play a critical role in the hierarchical ordering of castes.

If food and its attendant relations of commensality are a critical element in the ranking of castes, the behaviour of men and women in this arena also present divergences and contrasts. Women tend to be more circumscribed in taking proscribed foods or accepting food from other castes. Anthropologists, for instance, have often pointed out that women are more particular about commensal restrictions. In situations away from home and their locality, men tend to be more relaxed about rules of commensality; in a similar context women are both chaperoned and watched over carefully and are expected to follow these rules more strictly. Men have the excuse that they have to move about with all kinds of people. Women, of course, are not permitted such freedom. Moreover, the prescriptions and prohibitions regarding food for women are governed by principles of kinship, marriage and sexuality. Upper caste women who are meant to believe in the indissolubility of marriage, for instance, are expected to change their lifestyle drastically after they are widowed. They are required to observe strict rules of purity and pollution while preparing food, to give up the consumption of foods which are *tamasik*—which raise passion and desire—and to forego a 'proper' meal in the evenings. Women's practices concerning the consumption of food in terms of its intrinsic qualities as well as regulations of place and time are important determinants of the ritual status of their caste. Equally, these rules are governed by the need to regulate interaction with the outside world, particularly other castes and communities. The control over food is, at once, the protection of women from the transgression of sexual norms and a safeguard against a breach of the boundaries of caste.

Along with food, domestic rituals—the daily care of family deities and the propitiation of ancestors—are a major responsibility of women.⁷ In many families women do not actually perform the puja of the family deity; they nonetheless, make arrangements for its performance and prepare prasad. Where men are busy in professional work and the rules more relaxed, women can perform the daily puja. At the same time, on special days of worship, either

a male in the family or a Brahmin priest performs the puja. And then there are special pujas and fasts to be undertaken for the welfare of the husband and children and for the prosperity of the family. These rituals, worships, fasts and feasts are, in their detail, a part of the tradition of a caste. The key place of women in this arena along with limitations imposed on them simultaneously underscore their subordinate place in relation to the men within the family.

At the same time, the place of women as active agents and instructors in the arena of food and rituals also implies that women who command its repertoire of rules gain special respect that gives them a certain self-identity and self-esteem. For most women these practices are an important avenue of self-expression and social recognition. They also act as a medium which helps women exercise power over other women and men within the family. Thus, the nurture of self-esteem and self-assertion on the part of individual women is inextricably tied to the maintenance of family prestige. Responsibility for the preservation of traditions, maintenance of the sanctity of bounded space, control over rituals, the distribution of food and the task of socialization give women a sense of power over people and situations. The processes within which women carve out a living space also reinforce caste and its boundaries.

Food is an important element in the social acceptability of inter-caste unions. Acceptance of food cooked by a woman married into a family of another caste involves complex judgements regarding the differences in the ritual quality of foods in terms of their purity and vulnerability to pollution. Thus, depending upon the caste status of a woman, she may be prevented from entering the innermost cooking arena and allowed to prepare and serve only pakka food or snacks. Similarly, specific occasions—everyday cooking versus cooking on special occasions and rituals such as puja of the family deity, or shraddha of the ancestors—also entail boundaries. Significantly, a woman who belongs to a caste lower than that of her husband's can often cook ordinary food for the family but is not allowed to cook for the ancestors. Caste endogamy, which, as we shall see, is relevant for the placement of the offspring, also entails that a woman coming from another caste cannot be

fully incorporated into the husband's group and acquire the privilege of feeding the ancestors.

Marriage and sexuality

This brings us to the key area of marriage and sexuality. The caste system is premised upon the cultural perception of a fundamental difference in male and female sexuality. First, periodical pollution through menstruation and parturition renders women intrinsically less pure than men. There is, within a caste, a hierarchy between the sexes. At the same time, the difference in the levels of purity/impurity between men and women is much less among the lower castes than among the high castes. Low caste women, apart from self-pollution, also deal with others' pollution through occupational activities such as midwifery, disposal of dirt, the washing of dirty clothes and many other services. But their men, too, have to undertake polluting craftwork and service for others. Among these castes women's substantial contribution to the process of earning a livelihood along with the sharing of impure tasks by both men and women makes the gender division less unequal. It is, of course, true that among these castes menstrual pollution does impose certain disabilities on women in respect of food, worship of deities and ancestors. At the same time, Brahmin and other higher caste men neither incur self-pollution of the kind their women do nor do they have to perform polluting work for other castes. Their women, on the contrary, are involved in pollution incurred through bodily processes, mainly menstruation and childbirth. They are also responsible for doing some of the polluting tasks within the family, although this, perhaps, does not render them permanently less pure than men. There is a pervasive notion that women never attain the level of purity of men of their own caste. It is well known that traditionally women of twice-born castes have been equated with Shudras who could not be initiated into the learning of the Vedas.

The other source of impurity for women is widowhood. Widows are not supposed to perform the puja of family deities; they do not cook the pure food offered to these deities. A man, on the other hand, is not similarly affected if he becomes a widower. Such hierarchy between the sexes is more a feature of Brahmin and

other 'clean' castes. While some of the disabilities imposed on widows are prevalent among all castes, it can be argued that concerns of purity/impurity along the gender divide have an inverse relationship with the ritual status of castes.

Moreover, the cultural schemes which underlie the caste system are based upon a fundamental difference between male and female bodies in respect of their vulnerability to incur impurity through sexual intercourse. Sexual involvement is a much more serious matter for a woman since the act affects her internally while it affects a man only externally. In the case of inter-caste sexual relations a man incurs external pollution which can be washed off easily but a woman incurs internal pollution which pollutes her permanently. The contrast is expressed culturally by likening a woman to an earthen pot which is easily and permanently defiled if used by a polluted person within the caste or by a lower caste person or one of a different religion, and a man, on the other hand, to a brass pot which is not easily polluted and, in any case, can be restored to its original state by scrubbing, washing, and if necessary, by putting it through fire, a purifier par excellence. This metaphor—which distinguishes between men and women in terms of their respective vulnerability to pollution through sexual intercourse—is used extensively in caste and village councils when cases of sexual entanglements come up for adjudication. Indeed, it dwells in popular consciousness while judging men and women. It should be clear that upper caste women are much more vulnerable to permanent pollution than lower caste women. Indeed, sexual transgressions within the caste are treated much more leniently, particularly among those castes which allow secondary unions. Equally, it is entanglements with men of castes lower than that of the woman which are taken very seriously. Pollution incurred through food affects both women and men internally, but pollution incurred through sexual intercourse is radically different in character for the two sexes. This is closely linked to the dictum that sanctions hypergamy although within well-defined limits: 'Superior seed can fall on an inferior field but inferior seed cannot fall on a superior field.'

This brings us to the most crucial attribute in the cultural perception of differences between the sexuality of men and women.

The other differences are, in fact, orchestrated by the culturally coded master difference between male and female bodies in respect of procreation. In contrast to the tenuous and fleeting role of man in the process of procreation, a woman's role is long drawn and entails an involvement which is beyond extrication. In the case of an unattached woman, pregnancy is a disaster not just because in patrilineal society paternity is essential for group placement but also because the issues of caste boundaries and her own purity are involved. The number of orphanages and abandoned children in our country are proof of the effects of a combination of patriliney and caste. Sexual asymmetry is critically implicated in the twin principles of separation and hierarchy that characterize the caste system.

Marriage and sexual relations constitute a central arena in which caste impinges on women's lives. In the caste system membership of discrete and distinct groups is defined exclusively and unalterably by birth—this principle underlies the existence of castes as bounded groups. This characteristic entails a pervasive concern with boundary maintenance. Although in most of Hindu India, recruitment by birth follows the principle of patrilineal descent and thus the father's identity is essential for group placement, in the attribution of caste status to the child, the caste of the mother is not exactly irrelevant, and has to be taken into consideration. Irrespective of the descent system, caste, in fact, functions as a principle of bilateral affiliation.⁸

The extent to which caste functions as a principle of bilateral affiliation varies across regions and castes. By and large we can say that smaller marriage circles with an emphasis on the purity of caste and a preference for intra-kin marriages attach a greater value to the bilateral principle of caste affiliation. This applies principally to South India where intra-kin marriages over generations have, traditionally, made for narrow connubial circles. Even today intra-kin marriages have not lost their value although the proportion has decreased. However, even in contexts which underplay the bilateral principle of caste affiliation, a woman's role in biological reproduction, as we shall see, makes her primarily responsible for maintaining the purity of caste and its boundaries and calls for proper control over her sexuality.

The cultural apprehension of the vulnerability of women and the emphasis on their purity and restrained behaviour which entail limited interaction with the opposite sex, are important components of management of female sexuality in a caste society. The emphasis on arranged or negotiated marriages and the proper organization of space and time for young girls after puberty derive their justification from this concern with boundary maintenance, which means the maintenance of the ritual purity of caste. All these are implicated in the mechanisms and processes of socialization and in the opportunities for education and employment open to women. Caste thus imparts a special character to the process of growing up as a female. All this does not end with marriage. Women need to be controlled, their sexuality contained, at all times. This is sought to be achieved through mechanisms of proper social control, idealization of familial roles, and an emphasis on female modesty. The importance of the purity of caste affects a woman in all life-stages.

The beliefs and practices which negotiate and contain the threat posed by female sexuality are not uniform across the caste hierarchy and are also marked by regional variations. At the same time, there does exist a shared ideological framework that informs this arena. This framework rests upon a clear demarcation of phases of life with respect to female sexuality—a special ritual value accorded to virginity, the ritualization of puberty and special care accorded to pubescent girls, a glorification of the married state and motherhood, and, a clear distinction between primary and secondary marriage—which in turn constitute the institutionalized mechanisms for the containment of female sexuality.

The value attached to virginity is directly linked to the concern with female purity. The pre-pubertal phase is looked upon as a stage of intrinsic purity and is celebrated in a number of ways. The custom of worshipping and feeding virgin girls on specific days such as the eighth day of Navaratri is widespread in India. Equally, pre-pubertal girls are given special recognition in life cycle rituals. A pre-pubertal girl is looked upon as a manifestation of Devi or the Mother Goddess and is believed to drive away the lurking presence of an evil spirit and an evil eye. The purity and the consequent privileged status of a girl in the pre-pubertal stage

contrasts sharply with, and brings into clear relief, the next phase, the onset of puberty.

In South India, this change in a girl's status is dramatized through rituals. The rituals and special prescriptions of diet vary across castes. The core, and the underlying message, does not change. Similarly, in Orissa and Maharashtra, several castes observe the essential features of puberty rituals although they conduct them on a modest scale. The message of these rituals is clear. The girl has become a sexual being: this calls for restrained behaviour on her part and emphasizes the need for protection and vigilance. The occasion is at once auspicious and calls for a guard against the evil eye. The regulations regarding diet and movement are directed towards future fertility: they make the process of childbearing smooth and control the girl's sexuality. Restrained and controlled sexuality is a pre-requisite for socially sanctioned motherhood. The puberty ceremony informs the people within the kin-group and the jati that the girl has come of age and her marriage is open to negotiation. The mechanisms which set limits and restraints also sacralize and sanctify sexuality. In the rest of India the first menstruation is not marked by any rituals. The event is taken care of more or less unobtrusively. At the same time, restrictions relating to pollution, food and behaviour do come into play. The onset of puberty then is a definite departure in the life of a girl. She becomes conscious of her fragile purity.

It is, in fact, this preoccupation with female purity and its fragility that helps explain certain aspects of marriage in caste society. In traditional terms it is the marriage of a virgin with full rites within the acceptable limits of connubiality which sacralizes and sanctifies the girl's sexuality.⁹ It makes her a full member of her caste, and thus a complete person. In North and Central India the matrix of an early marriage of a girl, a long waiting period when she continues to stay in her natal home, and *gauna* or *mukhlawa*, the ritual of sending off the girl to her husband's house after puberty, is very common. If the family is not in a position to bear the double expenditure, the two ceremonies may be collapsed into one: the girl is formally sent to her husband's home for two or three days after marriage and is then brought back only to be sent after the onset of puberty.¹⁰ Similarly, the objective of early

marriage, namely, to preserve the virginity and purity of the girl until marriage, becomes clear if we look at Rajasthan where in some areas a number of baby brides are formally married to baby grooms in a specially held marriage fair on an auspicious day. It is also customary to marry off all the girls in a family from the age of two to thirteen or fifteen together on a special auspicious day.¹¹ The logic of an early marriage is clear: such child marriages ensure that a girl is married with full rites while still a virgin, and consummation of marriage can wait until she has come of age. It is significant that while castes and families who can afford to keep their girls secluded and protected tend to marry them off after puberty, other castes who require that their daughters work in the fields or away from home prefer to marry them before puberty. In a village in Sikar district in Rajasthan, where the normal age of marriage of girls ranged between seven to sixteen years, most post-pubertal marriages were among the Charans and Brahmins whose daughters did not work outside the home and could be segregated and secluded (Palriwala 1991). In Uttar Pradesh, once again, the poorer castes whose women and children have to work outside, away from home and without protection, find safety in pre-pubertal marriage (Kumud Sharma, personal communication). It is in the context of this valorization of virginity that we need to locate the critical cultural distinction between primary marriage and secondary unions.

A primary marriage connotes the marriage with full rites of a virgin with a man from an appropriate caste group. A woman goes through such a marriage only once in her life. Her subsequent unions may have social sanction and she may continue to use all the signs of the married state but she has permanently stepped outside the bounds of a primary marriage. These unions are not solemnized through full-blown rituals but socially declared through a symbolic act or a truncated ceremony—which could include the presentation of glass bangles or a nose ring to the woman which signifies married status, the exchange of garlands, and the throwing of a white cloth coloured at the corners over the woman's head symbolic of the fact that the woman is now protected by a man. It follows that the terms used for remarriage often refer to these acts: *churi pahanana* or the giving of glass bangles, *chadar*

dalna or the throwing of a sheet over the woman's head, *nath pahanana* or the giving of a nose ring. Alternatively, remarriage can be designated as 'coming to live in the man's house' or 'sitting' (*paithu/baithna*), 'getting a woman in the house' (*ghar me bithana*), or 'keeping a woman' in the house (*kari* or *karewa*). For a man, on the other hand, there are no restrictions on the number of times he can marry with full rites as long as the bride has not married before. Only if he marries a woman who has been already married in the past does he have to forego a marriage with full rites.

Only a properly married woman can rightfully enter secondary, socially approved, unions. This consideration extends to inter-caste secondary unions also. Traditionally, a woman cannot enter a socially approved union without the sacralization of her sexuality through a full ritual wedding conducted according to the customs of the caste. The distinction between primary and secondary marriage, once again, centres on the concern with female purity and the management of female sexuality. It is sought to be sustained by according a special value to primary marriage and a low status to a secondary union. Secondary unions are considered a concession to human weakness: a woman's need to satisfy sexual desire, without seriously undermining the boundaries of caste. The castes which permit remarriage, unlike Brahmin and other high castes, do not look upon the first marriage as indissoluble or inviolable. At the same time, it is the first marriage which has a sacramental character and is a *samskara* that cannot be repeated.¹² Importantly, the traditional absence of remarriage of widows and divorcees among a caste is an indicator of its high ritual status. Sexual asymmetry is inextricably bound up with the maintenance of the boundaries and hierarchies of caste.¹³

The principles of sexual asymmetry underlie the relationship between caste endogamy and dowry, the different fates of men and women in inter-caste unions, and the sexual abuse of women. We saw that caste purity is maintained through endogamy. Marriages are effected predominantly within a *jati* or a *jati* cluster. Srinivas (1976: 90) has pointed out that in contemporary caste society cognate *jatis* tend to get telescoped to form a single entity for purposes of marriage. Similarly, while caste associations with political ends comprise a number of endogamous *jati* in a caste or *varna*

category, specific connubial boundaries are sought to be maintained. Matrimonial columns in newspapers and magazines clearly indicate that marital boundaries have been relaxed only very narrowly. In these columns there are few entries which do not mention a prospective bride's/groom's caste (specific endogamous group, regional caste cluster, or in a few cases, varna). Even those who specify 'caste no bar' tend to mention their own caste, perhaps for those respondents who may be prepared to ignore caste but only up to a limited extent. A matrimonial relationship with a much lower caste seems out of the question.¹⁴ The compulsion to marry within a well-defined caste group in a patrilineal and patrilineal kinship system is closely tied to the practice of dowry.¹⁵

Caste both imposes constraints and creates the dominant ethos which underlies the practice of dowry within Hindu society. The increasing social and economic differentiation within an endogamous unit, traditional or currently acceptable, in terms of ownership of resources, income and professions has led to severe competition among parents of marriageable daughters. This has resulted in higher demands and expectations on the part of the groom's family. In a consumerist ethos, dowry becomes the easiest way of improving a family's lifestyle, and a source of ready cash. Middle class families are the worst sufferers in the marriage market. They have limited means but cannot think of violating the norms regarding marriage within the appropriate group. The pressures of endogamy compel them to stick to arranged marriages and trap them in negotiations with a premium on dowry. Moreover, in a social context defined by notions of male superiority where the right of first choice lies with the man and his family, the path of a negotiated marriage is replete with possibilities of the humiliation of young women. Finally, the principle of endogamy and the attendant concern with the maintenance of boundaries of caste impose restraints on young women. A daughter's reputation is predicated upon the constraints which bind her movements. What is at issue is not only the fear and the horror of premarital sex; opportunities to meet and associate with young unmarried men, most parents worry, may lead their daughter to choose her own partner.¹⁶ And what if he is from a lower caste? Dowry cannot be reduced to

endogamy; but its escalation within Hindu caste society cannot be understood without reference to it.

The principle of endogamy is, of course, subverted by sexual unions across castes. The boundaries of caste are breached, the norms transgressed. Male protagonists and female players have different fates.

We had noted the distinction between primary and secondary marriage. Secondary unions across caste are formed by individuals on their own initiative and are then taken cognizance of by the community. Among castes whose women can customarily enter into secondary unions, inter-caste unions receive a certain measure of acceptance if the man and the woman belong to castes of more or less equal status or the man belongs to a caste higher than that of the woman. The offence has to be expiated through the payment of a fine and the giving of a feast. The man is ostracized—if at all—temporarily and this becomes evident only on formal ritual and ceremonial occasions. In North and Central India the offspring of such unions are incorporated in the father's caste: his 'seed', even in an inter-caste secondary union, turns the children into members of a well-defined caste group. The temporary stigma borne by the children is not of much consequence. On the contrary the woman involved in such unions loses her caste; she is disowned by her family and kin-group. In some places this rejection is ritualized. In south-eastern Madhya Pradesh, for instance, the husband gives a mortuary feast (known as *marati-jeeti bhat*) announcing the symbolic death of his wife who has gone out of the caste. At the same time, the woman is never fully incorporated into her new husband's caste. She cannot participate as a full member in rituals or on ceremonial occasions including community feasts. Equally, a woman who has lost her caste has to depend on the man with whom she has lived for the disposal of her dead body. If the man is dead and there are no sons, her corpse is carried away by members of the lowest caste and buried without rituals. In South India the offspring of inter-caste unions are said to be assigned a status inferior to the children born of primary unions. The children bear the mother's stigma. In fact, the progeny born of the re-marriage of widows and divorcees within the caste are also assigned inferior status, which is, however, higher than that of children of

inter-caste unions. The gradations among children rest upon the caste and the marital status of the mother.¹⁷

A strong patrilineal ideology in which male blood is the real determining element in the placement of offspring—unless the mother is of a fairly low caste—is more characteristic of North than of South India. In the case of the Jats of Haryana, who represent an extreme case, even the ritual distance between castes was not of much significance. The relative freedom from Brahminical injunctions and the weak hold of norms of ritual purity and pollution meant that during the colonial period Jat men freely entered into sexual unions with women belonging to very low castes such as the Chamar and the Chuhra (scavenger). The children born of these women were absorbed into the Jat community. In Jat self-perception their community is like the sea: whatever falls into it becomes Jat (Prem Chowdhry 1994).¹⁸

The Rajputs or Kshatriyas, once again, have been open to hypergamous unions with women of different castes, often much below them in status. The ruling classes used their privileged status to ritually sanction their marriages with virgin girls of different clean castes. The offspring born of such unions adopted the father's identity; they were known as Rajputs, but had a lower status than their father. Women of secondary unions, of course, were and are looked upon as concubines.

Men of dominant castes, including Rajputs, also have mistresses from different castes. The ritual status of these men is not questioned as long as they do not establish a household and eat food cooked by their mistresses. It is only if there is an open and long term liaison with a very low caste woman that these men run the risk of being ostracized. The power and privilege of their family can serve to cover their indiscretion. Moreover, it is always possible for men to return to the caste fold through *prayaschitta* (atonement) for what they have done.

Men have institutionalized mechanisms to escape the incurrance of pollution through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman. This often takes the form of a purificatory bath and the ritual expiation of the offence. Orthodox Brahmins in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, for instance, after sleeping with a low caste woman discard the old sacred thread, have a purificatory bath

and don a new sacred thread. On the other hand, if a woman from these communities goes 'astray' and the matter becomes public knowledge she is banished, declared dead to the family and a 'mock' shraddha (funeral rites) is performed for her. The fate of the paramour of a high caste woman, if he belongs to a low caste, is severe punishment at the hands of the holders of power—Jats, Rajputs, Brahmins, Kammas—loss of sources of livelihood, a good beating, and sometimes, even death.¹⁹

Dominance predicated upon ownership of resources is intertwined with notions of the ritual status of different castes and the associated idea of graded qualities of blood. Low caste women are sexually exploited by powerful upper caste men owning land. It is not only difficult for low caste men to protect their women against the lust and desire of their upper caste masters and superordinates in the agrarian hierarchy, but there is also a tacit acceptance of upper caste 'seed'. Only if an upper or middle level caste man is excommunicated by his own community for having a sustained relationship with a low caste woman is he identified with her caste; their children grow up in the mother's caste. But things do not often come to such a pass. Fleeting liaisons and acts of sexual aggression by upper caste men are much more familiar. The low caste opposition to these—and other upper caste practices—results in sexual assaults on their women which attack the dignity and honour of the male kin and the community. Rape, as elsewhere, is an act of power through sexual violence. The assertion of dominance is claimed as a right by upper castes. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, it is said that just as a she-goat may be milked at any time at one's own will, so can a Chamar woman be enjoyed any time at one's discretion. In Vidarbha, Kunbi landowners who are on the lookout for Mahar women working in their fields say with contempt, 'Give her a few measures of grain and she will be quiet.' The control of resources and ritual status—together integrally informed by and constitutive of relations of power—reinforce each other and underlie the sexual exploitation of lower caste women by upper caste men.

Conclusion

I will, in conclusion, briefly consider whether apparently

inexorable and inevitable processes of change, invoked by myopic mouthpieces of modernization, have led to transformations in the relationship between caste and gender. There has certainly been a considerable loosening of the rules and norms governing commensality and a weakening of the attendant mechanisms of ostracism and excommunication: but the relational idiom of food and the play of rituals, articulated by the mutual intermeshing of caste and gender, continues to be critical for the functioning of families. Similarly, transformation in the nature and magnitude of social interaction characterized by the near-absence of commensal inhibitions, particularly in metropolitan and urban areas, the enactment of state laws which recognize inter-caste marriages, divorce and widow remarriage within the framework of the Hindu legal system, and a greater familiarity with the institution of civil marriage, have opened up possibilities of marriages outside the bounds of caste. At the same time, negotiated and arranged marriages within the recognized limits of connubiality are the dominant and overwhelming norm. Finally, the increased emphasis on caste identities in the wider context of institutionalized politics centering on the policies and practices of the state, has led to the reworking, refurbishment and reinforcement of 'caste traditions'. Caste is not dead. Gender is a live issue. The principles of caste inform the specific nature of sexual asymmetry in Hindu society; the boundaries and hierarchies of caste are articulated by gender.

Notes

- ¹ Caste is one of the basic institutions of Hindu society and has engaged the attention of scholars, activists and politicians. There is voluminous literature on the nature and character of caste in its various aspects. Its ideal typical structure with regional variations and the processes of change and continuity have been vividly described and cogently analyzed. Scholars have tried to explore the fundamental principles that underlie the caste system, and the study of caste has given rise to endless controversies and debates. At the same time, the significance of gender in understanding the caste system and the way caste impinges on women's lives, although not totally ignored, have not received the attention they deserve.
- ² The norms governed by the basic characteristics of caste have undergone dilution during the last few decades but they have not disappeared and still remain the typical identifying marks of Hindu society. When I refer to caste as jati, it is typically a birth-status group governed by the principles

of exclusion and hierarchy. The characteristic of interdependence between different castes through patron-client relations, providing services and goods and receiving means of subsistence in return, has weakened considerably but is still visible in different forms.

- ³ It is, of course, true that economic and political power has played an important part in the easy atonement or non-cognizance of offences, but here too, more often than not, this play has been essentially that of a familial unit to which the individual belongs.
- ⁴ Women resent such arrangements. Breman (1974) reports that among the Dubla who worked as bonded labourers for Anavil Brahmins in South Gujarat, girls did not wish to marry a bonded labourer for the fear of getting bound to the master's household and being required to do all kind of jobs at the beck and call of the master's family.
- ⁵ In this context, it is important to set out certain key categories and practices which inform and govern the relational idiom of food. An important distinction at work in North and Central India, is between *pakka* and *kachcha* food. *Pakka* food is boiled in milk or fried in clarified butter, which, along with fruits are pure substances and not significantly vulnerable to pollution. On the other hand, *kachcha* is essentially everyday food: rice, lentils and other cereals boiled in water are *kachcha* and highly vulnerable to pollution; they need to be cooked, served and preserved under rigorous conditions of purity. A similar, more rigorous, distinction—though not categorized in terms of the *kachcha* and *pakka* dichotomy—is at work in southern India as well. The key notion here is of what is referred to in Tamil as *patthu* food. Broadly, food cooked or steamed in water such as idli, lentils and, particularly, rice is *patthu*; as a corollary, contact with this food also makes one's hand *patthu*. The cooking, serving and distribution of this food requires conditions of a high level of purity, as indeed does the main meal offered by Brahmins and certain high castes to family deities and ancestors. *Madi* or *solu* or *sola*—in Tamil, Marathi and Hindi, respectively—refer to the practices of maintaining purity and avoidance of pollution. These practices may differ in detail and rigour but are informed by the same ideal (see Srinivas 1962, Khare 1976). Similarly, the notions of *enjalu* (Telugu), *aechal* (Tamil), *ushtu* (Marathi) and *jutha* (Hindi)—food that has been contaminated and polluted by coming into contact with spittle or the mouth—are widespread. Indeed, requirements of maintaining certain levels of purity of the body and of space and recognition of the pollution associated with women's bodily processes are prevalent to different degrees at all levels in the caste hierarchy. Women's behaviour with respect to food has great relevance to the hierarchical ordering of castes.
- ⁶ Onions and garlic along with strong condiments are believed to enhance sexual desire; non-vegetarian food has a similar effect and also nurtures anger. The flesh of animals and birds who live on refuse—for instance, domestic fowl—is traditionally forbidden to many castes who do eat fish

and certain other kinds of meat; pork is eaten only by a few low castes; and carrion is consumed by groups at the absolute bottom of the caste hierarchy.

- 7 During the last few decades there has been considerable standardization of rituals and calendrical festivals. Temples have become a common venue for the celebration of life-crisis rituals. Commercially-run organizations facilitate their performance. At the same time, standardization has not wiped out caste traditions. Many of the festivals, vratas and special pujas are associated with particular castes. In an annual shraddha of the father in an Iyer Brahmin's family, for instance, offerings are specified and food has to be cooked by the son's wife in a pure state. Special vratas and pujas associated with the auspicious married state, the honouring of pre-pubertal girls, and puberty rituals, also have caste-specific observances.
- 8 Even among a matrilineal caste group like the Nayar of Central Kerala where group placement was through the mother, the identification of paternity was essential to ensure that the woman had mated only with man/men from an appropriate caste or sub-caste, i.e. either from a superior group or from a group of roughly equal status and not from an inferior status caste group (See Gough 1959; Dube 1988c).
- 9 The significance of virginity in fulfilling the basic requirements of a first marriage and its centrality in the complex of rites which sacralize and sanctify female sexuality becomes clear if we look at the custom of pre-pubertal mock marriage prevalent among many castes in Chhattisgarh, south-eastern Madhya Pradesh, until a few decades ago. It is comparable to *ihī* (pre-pubertal marriage to bel-fruit) among the Newar of Nepal (Allen 1982) and a *tali*-tying ceremony among the matrilineal Nayar which was a living custom until the early part of this century (Gough 1955). In a token marriage in Chhattisgarh described by Dube (1953) a girl was married to a wooden pounder used for husking paddy before she attained puberty. Girls were actually married after puberty but a mock marriage before puberty was of the essence. 'Any sexual act or serious lapse (before the ceremony) would permanently defile the girl' (Dube 1953: p. 18). If a girl menstruated before the token marriage she suffered from serious disabilities. She was unable to participate in worship, or go near brides and grooms in weddings. She came under a serious social stigma and was permanently debarred from full and unqualified membership in the community. It is important to note that this pre-pubertal token marriage was also known as the first marriage; once a girl went through it her offenses and lapses were treated by caste authorities like those of a married woman. S.C. Dube has also described the custom of marriage of pre-pubertal girls with an arrow among the Chaukhtia Bhunjia, a tribal group of Chhattisgarh, who were known for a pervasive concern with maintaining the purity of their kitchen where the ancestors were lodged. Thus groups with a serious concern with exclusion or separation can have devices such as a

pre-pubertal token marriage for the sake of the purity of their women.

As is reported by a number of authors working in rural areas, marriage is a pre-requisite for conferring full adulthood and personhood on a male too; but there is a critical difference between the two. A man can go through the proper marriage ritual after he has had sexual relations with women and even children through them. There are recent cases from among the migrant Padyachi in East Delhi in which the corpse of an unmarried man was ritually married to the branch of a plantain tree so that the dead man did not turn into a ghost. My field material from Chhattisgarh also corroborates such a belief, and the related practice of ritually marrying the corpse of a man to an object before cremation/burial.

¹⁰ This pertains to a village in Ittawa district of Uttar Pradesh. I owe the information to Kumud Sharma of the Centre for Women's Development Studies who carried out a research project in the region.

¹¹ Rajni Palriwala kindly provided me with this information.

¹² It is significant that in many regions if a woman leaves her husband and goes away with a man of the same caste, the second husband has to pay a certain compensation to the previous husband, occasionally a fine, and give a feast for their acceptance as husband and wife by the community; the woman remains within the caste. If a married woman goes away with a man of another caste she is considered lost to the caste, but she—and not her parents—has to shoulder the blame. On the other hand, if an unmarried girl elopes there is great commotion. It is disgraceful, people think, that the parents did not get her properly married at the right time, and traditionally she may not be married with full rites. It is only if the matter is contained and the man is from the same caste that the two may be married off quickly. These days village folk have started resorting to registered marriages in cases of elopement and inter-caste unions. State law then becomes a means to underscore the sanctity of primary marriage.

¹³ Women have been focal signs and subjects in processes of social mobility and efforts towards raising the status of caste groups. It is well known that in the system of hierarchically graded birth-status groups, change has often taken the form of collective efforts on the part of a caste group to raise its ascribed status through the adoption of practices and beliefs of a ritually higher group. Women have been critical to the process of Sanskritization, the adoption and appropriation of symbols of a higher caste status by middle and lower castes and a simultaneous discarding of practices and customs that are signifiers of a low ritual status. A few illustrations: the imposition of seclusion and restrictions on the freedom of movement of women; their enforced withdrawal from productive activities outside the home; prohibitions on widow remarriage and the concomitant expectation of a life of self-denial and austerity from widows; severe restrictions on divorce and remarriage; and a shift towards dowry from bridewealth and the mutual exchange of gifts between the families of the bride and the

groom. The mechanisms of social mobility impose restrictions and constraints on women and make them socially and economically more dependent on men.

- 14 These observations are based on my reading of matrimonial columns in recent issues of *The Times of India*, *The Hindustan Times* and *The Navbharat Times* and in *Sarita*, a Hindi magazine.
- 15 Large dowries have been common among the Marathas of Maharashtra, Patidars and Anavil Brahmins of Gujarat, the Rajputs of many areas and the Kanyakubj Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh. These castes are internally ranked and practice intra-caste hypergamy (marriage between a lower status female and a higher status male). Compulsions of marrying within well-defined limits combined with internal gradations render the position of these young women and their families precarious. It is not surprising then that some of these groups have practiced female infanticide. Srinivas (1976) has observed that until a few decades ago most South Indian castes including Brahmins followed the custom of bride-price. A ceremonial exchange of gifts between affinal families seems to have been the norm. A decrease in marriages among kin, economic and social differentiation within a jati, and the relative expansion of marriage circles covering cognate jatis have perhaps contributed to the escalation of dowry. Interestingly, many strictly endogamous, numerically small, exclusive jatis such as certain Maharashtrian Brahmin castes, the Nagar Brahmins of Gujarat and Chaturvedi Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh, did not practice dowry. Obviously they placed greater value on purity of blood, family traditions, and the bride's familiarity with necessary ritual observances.
- 16 Young urban girls who are allowed freedom of movement and association are, very often, able to escape the menace of dowry and also do well professionally.
- 17 In this connection see Dumont (1970) and Srinivas (1976).
- 18 The recent rise in caste consciousness and ethnic pride has resulted in Jat men discarding their laxity and flexibility in respect of inter-caste unions. Gradually the Jats have come to frown upon the earlier practice of taking low caste women as wives.
- 19 Consider two instances: In coastal Andhra Pradesh a Kamma girl was involved with a Mala 'Untouchable' boy. She was whisked away and quietly married off within the community. The Mala paramour was found missing. The powerful Kammas had seen to it that he got the punishment he deserved: he was put to death. The issue was taken up by the print media but the Kammas proved to be far too clever and powerful to be brought to book (Lakshmi: personal communication).

In a recent incident in a village located on the Uttar Pradesh-Rajasthan border, a Jat girl and a Jatav boy were hanged on the orders of the Jat-dominated village panchayat. Their crime was elopement. The third person to be hanged was also a Jatav: he had helped the lovers elope. The two 'Untouchable' boys were tortured before they were hanged. The girl

had to be hanged because she had continued to express her intentions to marry the Jatav boy (Sidhu in *India Today*, 30 April 1991).

References

- Allen, Michael. 1982. 'Girls' Pre-Puberty Rites amongst the Newars of Kathmandu Valley' in Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee (eds.), *Women in India and Nepal*, pp. 179–210. Australian National University Monographs on South Asia No. 8.
- Breman, Jan. 1974. *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chowdhry, Prem. 1994. *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana, 1880–1990*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Dube, Leela. 1986. 'Seed and Earth: Symbolism of Biological Reproduction and Sexual Relations of Production', in Leela Dube, Eleanor Leacock and Shirley Ardener (eds.) *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development*, pp. 22–53. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 1988 a. 'On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India' in Karuna Chanana (ed.), *Socialization, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*, pp. 166–190. Delhi: Orient Longman.
- . 1988 b. Another version of this paper appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly*. 30 April 1988.
- . 1988 c. 'The Nature of Bounded Groups and the Management of Female Sexuality: The Khasi and the Nayar', paper presented at the 12th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Zagreb, and at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
- Dube, S.C. 1953. 'Token Pre-Puberty Marriages in India', *Man* (O.S.) 53: 18–19.
- Dumont, Louis. 1970. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- . 1961. 'Marriage in India: The Present State of the Question: I', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 5, pp. 75–95.
- . 1964. 'Marriage in India: The Present State of the Question: II', *Contribution to Indian Sociology*, 7, pp. 77–98.
- . 1966. 'Marriage in India: The Present State of the Question: III', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 9, pp. 90–114.
- Ganesh, Kamala. 1989. 'Seclusion of Women and the Structure of Caste', in M. Krishnaraj and K. Chanana (eds.), *Gender and the Household Domain: Social and Cultural Dimensions*, pp. 75–95. New Delhi: Sage.
- . 1993. *Boundary Walls: Caste and Women in a Tamil Community*. Delhi: Hindustan Publishing House.
- Gough, E.K. 1955. 'Female Initiation Rites on the Malabar Coast,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 85, Parts 1 and 2, pp. 45–80.
- . 1959. 'The Nayers and Definition of Marriage,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 89, Part I, pp. 23–34.
- . 1961. 'Nayers: Central Kerala', in D.M. Schneider and E.K. Gough

- (eds.), *Matrilineal Kinship*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Karlekar, Malavika. 1976. 'A Study of Balmiki Women in Delhi', in Leela Dube, Eleanor Leacock and Shirley Ardener, (eds.), *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development*, pp. 324–340. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Khare, R.S. 1976. *The Hindu Hearth and Home*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Krygier, Jocelyn. 1982. 'Caste and Female Pollution', in Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee (eds.), *Women in India and Nepal*, pp. 75–104. Australian National University Monographs on South Asia No. 8.
- Palriwala, Rajni. 1991. *Production, Reproduction and the Position of Women in a Rajasthan Village*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delhi.
- Patel, Tulsi. 1994. *Fertility Behaviour: Population and Society in a Rajasthan Village*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sidhu, W.P.H. 1991. 'Mehrana: Medieval Murders', in *India Today* pp. 122–125, 30 April 1991.
- Srinivas, M.N. 1952. *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1962. *Caste in Modern India and other Essays*. London: Asia Publishing House.
- . 1976. *The Remembered Village*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 1977. 'The Changing Position of Indian Women,' *Man* (NS) XII, 2:221–38.
- . 1984. *Some Reflections on Dowry*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. Also included in Srinivas, 1989.
- . 1989. *Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Stevenson, H.N.C. 1954. 'Status Evaluation in the Hindu Caste System' in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 84: 45–65.
- Tambiah, S.J. 1973. 'From Varna to Caste through Mixed Unions' in J. Goody (ed.), *The Character of Kinship*, pp. 191–229. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Yalman, Nur. 1963. 'On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar' in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 93: 25–58.

From M.N. Srinivas (ed) *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, 1996 New Delhi: Viking, Penguin, pp. 1–27.

4 Violence & Sexuality

Caste and Gender

Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence

VASANTH KANNABIRAN &
KALPANA KANNABIRAN

Incidents of upper caste violence in Tsundur, Chilakurti and Gokarajupalli in Andhra Pradesh, between 1989 and 1991 forced us to search for answers to questions crucial to the survival of disadvantaged groups: the schedule castes and women especially. We need to understand how the caste question and the women's question are intermeshed.

In Tsundur near Tenali in Guntur district, 21 dalits were massacred in a most brutal manner by the upper caste Reddis with the alleged connivance of the police. This was the culmination of a whole month of tension and relatively minor confrontations between the Reddis and the dalits. (The dalits involved in this incident are Malas. Tsundur also has a small community of Madigas as well as some other artisan castes. This confrontation divided the dalits with the Malas being singled out by the Reddis.) On July 7 this year, the foot of a dalit boy, Ravi, accidentally touched a Reddi boy sitting in front of them in the cinema hall in Tsundur. Ravi, an MA student studying in Nagpur, apologized immediately but was roughed up by the Reddi boys sitting in front. This angered Ravi's friends who repeated the same treatment on the Reddi boys. Ravi's parents, both teachers, sensing trouble sent him away to Ongole. When the Reddis who came in search of Ravi found him missing, they held his father, Bhaskara Rao captive. Details of Ravi's whereabouts were then forced out of Bhaskara Rao, and on the day Ravi was due to return from Ongole, the Reddis went to

the railway station in a gang, chased him, beat him up brutally, forced brandy down his throat, took him to the police station and asked the circle inspector to register a case against him that he had misbehaved with women in a drunken state. Meanwhile in a parallel incident, Rajbabu, another dalit boy was knifed in the arm by one Krishna Reddi because he was supposed to have grazed his body against two Reddi girls outside the cinema hall. The dalit version is that these women were walking alongside him and Rajbabu turned around and looked at them. When Rajbabu's friends took him to the police station and asked the circle inspector to register a case against Krishna Reddi, the circle inspector put the injured Rajbabu in the lock-up and admitted Krishna Reddi in the hospital. A few days later, around July 12, the mandal revenue officer, offering to negotiate a settlement between the two groups, asked the dalits to come to the police station the next day. When the dalits went at the appointed time, they were bundled into a waiting police van and taken to Tenali, where they were produced before the magistrate on the charge that they had assaulted upper caste people. Following this there was a social boycott of Mala dalits in the village for close to a month. They therefore had to go to Tenali to buy their provisions and those who worked as agricultural labourers had to go to Ongole in search of work. During this period there was a police force of 60, including one DSP, one CI and five SIs stationed in the village to 'maintain peace'. On August 6 at about 11 a.m. the police suddenly entered the Mala dalit houses. The women, fearing that the men would be attacked, asked them to run away from there. The men ran into the fields, where armed upper caste Reddis were waiting for them. They were hacked to pieces. Some of them were thrown in nearby fields, while others were put into gunny sacks and thrown into the river. On the evening of August 6, the DSP issued a statement that all was peaceful in Tsundur. The fact of the massacre was kept *sub rosa* for over 24 hours and came to light only when some dalit women stole out of the village and walked about 40 km to Guntur to report it to the district collector. After this incident, all the dalits had to flee to Tenali where they were offered shelter in the Salvation Army Church. All the Mala dalits of Tsundur were Christians by faith.

Chilakurti is a small village in Nalgonda district, with approximately 2,500 households. On August 14, this year, 35-year-old Muthamma, a Golla by caste and an agricultural labourer was brutally beaten up by three Reddi goondas and paraded naked through the streets of the village, arrack being forced down her throat all the while. It was day of the village shandy but nobody intervened or came to her rescue. The women unable to bear the sight, went indoors and shut their doors. The men covered their eyes. One old man who tried to come forward and cover her with a cloth was also beaten up. It was only at the initiative of the agencies of the state, the district collector and police officials that this case was registered. For the villagers, this was not the first time this kind of thing had happened. Muthamma was only one of many victims. She was picked up because she was believed to have helped a Reddi girl elope with a Golla boy, while she herself denies the charge. That the girl who eloped had long had a relationship with this boy and that her family had got a pregnancy terminated in the sixth month was common knowledge in the village.

In Krishna district, two dalit youths were found dead under suspicious circumstances around August 24. The body of Srinivasa Rao of Gokarajupalli was found floating in a tank on August 3, but the first reports appeared on August 24, when the dalits of Gokarajupalli who had fled to Kanchikacheria nearby to escape being attacked by upper caste landlords brought it to the notice of the press. This is the second time dalits of this 'dalitwada' have fled, the first time being when Chandra Rao, a dalit boy was found murdered on January 16, 1989. A second incident reported on August 24 along with the death of Srinivasa Rao was the death of a dalit boy who had allegedly teased an upper caste girl. This despite the fact that the boy's mother had tendered an apology to the mother of the girl and admonished her son in public.

In yet another incident, a dalit rickshaw-puller was tortured by the police till he lost consciousness in Challapalli of Krishna district on the complaint by two upper caste women who had hired him that he had stolen one of their anklets.

The causes for the eruption of conflict are not immediate and spontaneous. In Tsundur, for instance, the mandal revenue office

records show that although the Reddis are the landowners and are economically dominant, the dalits have moved far ahead in the field of education and most of them work outside Tsundur. Only 20 per cent of the Reddis' land is cultivated by the dalits. More than half the village is literate with an approximate balance between male and female literacy. Among these literates figure the 10 to 20 dalit postgraduates, dozens of dalit graduates and roughly 200 dalit matriculates. Compare these figures with the total absence of postgraduates and graduates among the Reddis. Being as qualified as they are, not all dalits depend on the Reddis for work. At least 500 of them are employed in the South Central Railway as fitters, maintenance men and in the telephone department. It is only a small proportion of dalits who depend on tenant cultivation. The only fact in favour of the Reddis [caste status apart] is that they own 2,420 acres of land as against 78 acres owned by the dalits. Even here, the land is divided among as many as 1,044 persons, the break-up being roughly as follows: 253 households with between 2.5 to 5 acres each and 84 households with an average of 12 acres each. Although no dalit possesses more than a hectare of land, the Reddis can by no stretch be described as 'big landowners'. Earlier instances of tension in this area resulted when the dalits resisted attempts by the landlords to replace them as tenants employing landless upper caste people instead (*Indian Express*, August 20, 1991). The strength to do this resulted in no small measure from the real bargaining power that the dalits had illustriously built for themselves. Further, the Tsundur Mandal Praja Parishad president was a dalit belonging to the Congress (I) as were some others from neighbouring areas. Not only had the dalits excelled in education—a strong upper caste preserve—they had also made inroads into the upper echelons of the Congress party at the local level thus appropriating yet another upper caste preserve. A cursory look at these facts is enough to tell us that the cinema hall incident that triggered off the large-scale violence only detonated tension that had steadily accumulated over the years and was caused by the changing structure of relationships between upper and lower castes. It is important not to trivialise the issue by situating the entire confrontation and its genealogy within the cinema hall and within

homogenizing notions of the 'traditionally' oppressive relationships between upper castes and dalits, thus viewing this structure in a historical and essentialist frameworks.

The social relations of caste and gender are based on the exercise of power through the use of force. This power could have many dimensions: it can be simple and direct in its assertion; it can be complex in not permitting the space for the raising of issues outside the parameters it creates. But the most absolute exercise of power is that grievance or dissent is not even articulated. To articulate a grievance indicates a degree of political awareness of a wrong which the absolute exercise of power does not permit. So what we witness today in the increasing violence that enforces the maintenance of 'order' in relations of caste and gender is the weakening of an absolute power that did not allow or permit the space for the articulation or even the awareness of grievance or a sense of wrong and the consequent blurring of carefully drawn lines of demarcation.

This blurring can occur in any arena of activity. Education is an important arena. In Tsundur especially, the higher levels of education among the Dalits in an important sense obliterated the distinction between them and the Reddis. Another is dress. An acknowledged source of irritation in Tsundur was the fact that dalit boys now dressed extremely well thus rejecting the traditional marker of status and caste. A bitter deadlock and siege of dalits occurred in Orissa because a dalit woman dressed up well, i.e., she was neatly dressed and had oiled and combed her hair when she went to receive her wages. An ironic comment from the landlord that she had dressed like his women prompted all the dalit women to go to work in their best clothes as a protest the next day. Predictably, the landlords again commented that they could now start taking the dalit women home as their wives. The tension that broke out as a result was finally diffused by a truce between Kshatriya and dalit men that the women in either community would not step into each other's localities in future.

Thus an encounter between a woman and a man of different castes is resolved by a truce between men of two castes—a truce that circumscribes the territorial space for women of both casts (it is significant here that while upper caste women did not figure

at all in the course of this conflict, a new space was demarcated and defined for them as well). Although this solution was accepted by dalit women and adhered to by them for over a year, it raises several important questions for us. First of all this incident draws our attention to a crucial characteristic of caste—the mediation of inter caste relations through a redefinition of gendered spaces—and underscores the ways in which caste and gender are inter-meshed, rendering an ungendered understanding of caste impossible.

Gender within caste society is thus defined and structured in such a manner that the 'manhood' of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of passivity of the women of the caste. By the same argument, demonstrating control by humiliating women of another caste is a certain way of reducing the 'manhood' of those castes. This is why, while Muthamma was being paraded naked in the streets of Chilakurti, the men of her caste who unable to bear the sight, covered their eyes, were derided by the aggressors who said, 'Open your eyes. Are there no men amongst you?' This insult is double edged. On the one hand gender is defined by the capacity to aggress and appropriate the other. On the other hand the lower caste man could only cover his eyes because the structure of relations in caste society castrates him through the expropriation of his women. It is painful, intensely so, to consider Muthamma's torture and her public humiliation in being stripped and paraded through the village shandy; it is poignant to listen to accounts of the men averting their eyes or turning their backs on her nakedness while being accused of impotence by the aggressors. To add insult to injury visitors who flocked to the village on hearing of the incident self-righteously asked the men if they had lost their moustaches and whether there were no males left in the village.

When the same suggestion (that is of taking upper caste women as wives) is made in the reverse, albeit in milder vein, it is enough provocation for dalits everywhere to be massacred. Take the Bodi riots in Tamil Nadu for instance. Dalits organized themselves when a dalit leader who organized a procession demanding higher wages was raped and killed by upper caste landlords. At one of the public meetings organized to protest against this incident, a dalit political

leader is reported to have said 'What will happen if dalit men should all marry upper caste women?' This led to great tension and the exacerbation of violence and caste riots all over the state with the lives of all dalits thrown at risk. Many of them had to pledge themselves and their undying loyalty through written bonds to landlords' families in order to safeguard their lives in the surrounding villages.

The provocation for the upper caste men who raped the dalit leader was two-fold: First, in demanding higher wages, she (and others with her) was clearly overstepping the limits of her caste status which was defined by passivity and submissiveness. Second, in making a public demand she was overstepping her limits and asserting herself in a gendered space—in this sense caste functions within a rigidly gendered space. But this gendered space has dimensions of caste and class which crucially structure the way in which women of different castes and classes experience gender. Inevitably, when women especially those belonging to the lower castes confront their being policed by upper caste men, rape is the ultimate punishment—for the women certainly, but more importantly and symbolically for the men.

A mere suggestion of the kind made by the dalit politician about marrying upper caste women was enough to rouse upper caste wrath to a degree that resulted in the loss of life and dispossession of hundreds of dalits in Tamil Nadu. In Tsundur it provided a justification for police complicity in upper caste violence and a mere allegation that dalit boys had molested Reddi girls led to the registering of cases without verification. The onus of proof rested on the victim, the dalit. A matter of further significance is that the initial complaints of the harassment were filed by Reddi men who claimed to be eyewitnesses and not by the women who were supposed to have been molested. At this point upper caste women did not appear on the scene. Yet when after the massacre, 300 women of the upper castes marched in a procession in the streets of Tenali declaring that their 'modesty had been outraged' by dalit men of Tsundur it served to justify, in retrospect, the prior massacre of the dalits. The motivation behind this rare demonstration of collective action by upper caste women needs little explanation; the primary duty of an upper caste woman

being to protect the life of her man and ensure his longevity, because her own social existence is defined by and hinges on his life. The dalit women can claim no such privilege since she can and has been expropriated by the upper caste men as a matter of their right. There are countless examples of this expropriation. Let us look at just two such instances here. The first incident involves a dalit woman from Orissa who was beaten up mercilessly by the landlord, because when he summoned her for some work, she was feeding her husband and said she would go after her husband had eaten. Her husband was beaten up too and life was made very difficult for both of them by the landlord, but they were forced to stay on there because they had nowhere to go to—also, perhaps, they knew that no matter where they went, things would not really be very different. A far more serious example, and one that is alarmingly on the increase in Andhra Pradesh, is that of the numerous instances of rape and sexual harassment of minor and adolescent dalit girls in social welfare and missionary hostels by men in positions of power. What is really alarming here is the total failure of the government machinery in checking violence of this kind, and bringing the aggressors to book.

The issue of power is brought sharply into focus here. The values and ideology deriving from their caste situation are so deeply internalized by women of the upper castes that what would normally, by upper caste standards, be an unimaginable act, marching on the streets crying rape, now achieves respectability because upper caste women are crying out in defence of their endangered chastity. The authenticity of the allegation is another matter. The more basic question is that to allow dalits the privilege and protection of the state is to throw open the doors to the rape of the other castes. A powerful argument indeed.

Streets are typically gendered spaces. While men and youth inhabit and use streets naturally and forcefully with a sense of belonging, notice how women scurry along, or often sidle along pavements fully conscious of its being alien, unfriendly territory. The only women who are relatively easy on the streets are vendors, prostitutes and other women for whom the street is a site of work. Further, streets are gendered spaces that are mediated by caste. When dalit women step onto the streets in protest, they are seen

as transgressing their limits. When upper caste women take to the streets in protest, their sense of wrong and their appropriation of public space is immediately legitimate. There is yet another dimension to the question of gendered spaces. Parading a woman in the streets with the use of force, among other things signals her 'availability'; it is also a statement made about the character of women and therefore, the character of her caste; women being seen as bearers of tradition and protectors of the honour of the caste. Apart from the violence perpetrated on Muthamma, this incident must be seen as an assertion of power over all women in her caste. And the backward and scheduled caste women in Chilakurti got the message right. They locked themselves indoors and hid knowing that the same thing could happen to them. It was also probably at a much deeper level a fear of being identified as public women. This is reminiscent of the processions in which 'joginis' who are scheduled caste 'devadasis' in Andhra in contrast to the upper caste devadasis, dance. While the upper caste devadasis officiate at religious ceremonies and festivities the scheduled caste devadasis are indispensable to a funeral procession. They drink toddy and dance before the body. The fact that arrack was forced publicly down Muthamma's throat could thus have had symbolic overtones. Was it her 'availability' and her 'public' nature that was being sought to be established, one wonders.

So far we have been looking at how women's complicity is established in the actions of a caste group and the manner in which her space is demarcated and defined by the men. A caste is chastised not just by the exercise of force or violence on the women of that caste but also by the use of violence on children. A violence that is also patriarchal and gendered. Consider for instance the case of dalit children in Thanjavur who were electrocuted by the upper castes because they dared to play at the upper caste well. What can be more brutal than the killing of unsuspecting children playing at a well in which the water was electrified? Who was the lesson aimed at? Brutality to any degree is condoned, tacitly, when the issue in question is the assertion by upper castes of absolute control over their territory. This assertion is blind—the difference between pests, animals, women, children and dalits is obliterated by its total neutrality.

While landownership is a crucial determinant of caste relations, the lack of control over land does not deprive the upper castes of either their arrogance or their actual control. This was demonstrated for us in the Chilakurti case where Muthamma was beaten and paraded in the streets of the village by Reddi goondas who neither belonged originally to the village nor owned much land there. And yet it was their caste privilege that protected them.

Finally we come to two extremely complex issues that a consideration of caste throws up. The first is the question of religious faith. While it might be simpler to view caste as a Hindu phenomenon, and resort to a conventional explanation that sees conversion as an escape from an oppressive reality, a look at the experience and social practice of other religious groups in India re-emphasizes the resilience of caste, not as a religious institution but an institution that structures social relations irrespective of religious faith. This is even more relevant to the present discussion because, the section of dalits in Tsundur who were the target of attack were all Christians. We will consider the case of a dalit Christian woman who joined a convent in order to escape the oppression of belonging to a dalit family in an upper caste village, as well as that of being the eldest daughter in a family of a dozen odd children to be cared for and nurtured while the parents were away working in the fields. This woman ran away from home and registered herself as a novitiate with the hope that she could escape both caste and gender oppression within the security of the order. During the period of the novitiate training everyone was treated equally and all novitiates, irrespective of their socio-economic background, were expected to do all kinds of work. Once they were through with their training, they were sent to the various centres where their work really began. It was here that the details of their family background, caste and class began to play a major role in the kinds of work assigned to them, and the treatment meted out to them. Also, in an institution that rested on the vow of celibacy, younger nuns from poorer and more disadvantaged backgrounds were constantly open to the accusation of trying to attract the male priests who visited the centre. Caste-based oppression within the church became so intolerable after a point, that the dalits moved out and formed an order of their own. The

rigidity of caste is not restricted to this order. The segregation among some Protestant groups in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh is so great that they would rather intermarry with Hindus of their own caste than with Christians of another caste. Even during service in the church, some churches have separate enclosures for dalits who have to stand through the service and receive communion only after the upper castes have left. And this is only to be expected. Christianity after all did not enter or flourish in a vacuum. The socio-historical context that received the faith without doubt shaped and still shapes it. The reasons for mass conversion of dalits to Christianity should be sought in frameworks other than the oft-repeated statement that Christianity (or for that matter any religion) offers an escape from oppressive institutions. This issue is complex and difficult to articulate. The attempt here is not in any way to condone the evils of one faith but to point to the complexities of our social reality. At a more immediate level it is to say that what is relevant now is not a debate about the 'value' of a faith but a comprehensive understanding of social practice.

The second fact that is again very complex and difficult to articulate without being accused of crudity is the relationship that exists between low caste men and upper caste women. While it is common knowledge that in many areas where upper caste men are away from home managing their businesses, the women have sexual relationships with their men servants, this in itself does not run counter to the caste hierarchy because power and control is vested with the women by virtue of their caste status. It is only when the caste norms are openly flouted by elopement, pregnancy, or discovery, that punitive action becomes necessary. In Muthamma's case the Reddi woman who eloped with the Golla man had had a long relationship with him. It became an issue only when they decided to elope.

The problem of articulation (and indeed understanding) comes when dalit men, having gained access to power, decide to adopt the methods of the upper castes in exercising this power. It is not uncommon to see dalit boys molesting or passing derogatory remarks about upper caste girls—the case of the dalit boy in Krishna district cited at the beginning of this article is an

example—thus getting their own back in threatening the manhood of their oppressors. This, it appears, is inevitable if the reversal of the power structure merely replicates the earlier pattern and is restricted to an exchange in caste status without a radical redefinition of status, power and hierarchy that challenges the very basis of caste and patriarchal structures. Otherwise the earlier pattern is merely replicated. What we must not lose sight of is the distinction between the violence that is a reaction and often a legitimate response to caste oppression and violence on women of the other caste or community in order to attack or erode its sense of worth which is welded to these definitions of manhood.

It is especially difficult to achieve this in a situation where political organization itself takes place within the ambit of the structures being challenged and where the focus of political action is the disability that characterizes the group. A radical praxis, therefore, while striving towards the undermining of hierarchical structures, must be built on a recognition of caste and gender as twin mediators of oppression from the outset. Unless this is done we will just have the reality of Bodi repeat itself, with the oppressed—whether they are dalits, minorities or women—undermining their own struggle.

From Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran (eds.) De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power, Calcutta: Stree, 2001.

The Impossible Subject

Caste and the Gendered Body

SUSIE THARU

Your funeral is also part of your life as a living man.

No reader familiar with the canonical texts of modern Indian literatures needs to be told how large the figure of the Hindu widow looms there, and in what unexpected places it makes an appearance. Indeed—and I discovered this to my surprise while working on *Women Writing in India*—from about the middle of the 19th century onwards this figure has held a more-or-less centre-stage position in the national imagery. It could be argued, and I am going to do so, that when a writer features a widow as protagonist he or she is, consciously or unconsciously, making an intervention in a debate centred on this figure; a debate whose history is a history of Indian humanism and its intimate yet troubled relationship with Indian feminism. It is only when we frame widow-narratives in this way that other crucial dimensions of the genre become apparent. The widow is a figure whose very life is marked by a specific death. She is 'vidhava'—without husband—and consequently in need not only of public protection, but also of regulation, governance. Widow stories therefore are invariably also subtly modulated historical engagements with questions of governmentality and citizenship.

A close reading of two contemporary short stories that feature the widow as protagonist provide the basis for this article on gender, caste and citizenship. The figure provides one story with its title: 'Mother'. This widow is a young woman. In the other she is a visitor from three generations ago, a great-grandmother. Both stories devolve around the widow's relationship with a younger person in the family. Death is thematic. The questions raised

therefore are of reproduction and inheritance—of life itself and the possibilities of its continuity.

I

I will begin with the more recent story, Gita Hariharan's 'The Remains of the Feast' taken from her 1992 collection, *The Art of Dying*, because it is a story about a brahmin widow. After all, when one thinks of a widow, one thinks of a Hindu widow, and when one says Hindu widow, in the last century no more than now, one means brahmin widow.

The story, very briefly, is about a brahmin woman who was widowed young and has lived the prescribed life of austerity. She has outlived her only son and his wife, and is now with her grandson, a retired bureaucrat, his wife, and their medical-student daughter. Suddenly at 90 when she is dying of cancer, a new life bursts forth in a hitherto controlled appetite that declares its scandalous self. It desires everything that it has been forbidden: cakes with eggs in them, from the Christian shop with a Muslim cook, coca-cola laced with the delicious delight that it might be alcoholic, bhel-puri from the fly-infested bazaar, possibly touched by untouchable hands, tweezed eyebrows, shaven legs; and finally, in the flourish of death, a sari of bridal red. Years of deprivation pale into insignificance against the grandeur of this feast in which the flesh reasserts its primal authority. Hariharan's plot is minimal; the pleasure of the tale invested in the dry, ironic tone and in the tension set up between narrative and narratorial accounts. The story is a finely-etched and mischievously-framed cameo. It presents itself as that—a jewel in a minor genre, to be enjoyed in passing. In that sense, the seriousness with which I approach and stay with this text is a misreading. Yet, to my mind it is precisely the apparent lightness of this text, the ease with which the reader passes over its objects, the understatement and non-violence with which the authorial voice can affirm its common sense, its logic, its taste, it is precisely these that mark the story out as a significant text of our time.

In some ways the widow in this story is the costumed, 19th century subject of the colonial social reform movements. Her head is tonsured, she wears white cotton, eats only the prescribed daily

meal of non-heating foods and lives as an appendage in a household organized around its active 'householder' subjects. But unlike her predecessor, this widow is not the victim of a cruel and superstitious society. Far from it. She is a being with a joyous, child-like relationship to her body which is the secret of her health, her self-sufficiency, her longevity—perhaps also because she has escaped the government of the post-independence socialist decades. Her resilient embodiment is the basis of her primitive, enduring personhood, and her irrepressible force as subject-agent. With it she survives the 20th century, quiet, but undefeated. Literally of course, and also—as we shall find—politically. Hers is a body-personhood that exceeds discipline (she makes farting a musical event, she laughs indecorously, her body odours rampage through the house and survive even her death). This body-person has a native wit that can play social injunction off against social injunction like a fish in post-structuralist water (caste-gender taboos as well as the secular norms of middle class propriety are forced to move aside when the demand is the gratification of a desire expressed in the face of death) and laugh subversively in the very face of authorities that would control her. This is a body-person that can compel the reiteration essential to its maintenance. As a result, while two intervening (Nehruvian?) generations may have lost touch with this strength which displays itself, heightened and stylised like an art-work, in the dying woman's grossly irreverent appetite, the great-granddaughter has the ability to recognize the appetite for what it is—and affirm/indulge it, despite the disapproval of her proper middle class parents. It is the great-granddaughter who smuggles in tabooed goodies and finally even makes an attempt to draw the most sacred of traditional rites—the funeral—into the old woman's new life by draping the body in red silk. She is also the fictional narrator.

Positioned as mirror-image to the narratorial mediation in this neatly structured story is another mediation—that of the great-grandmother's desires, which function as a lens through which the young woman's own more contemporary appetites and deprivations come into focus and may be recognised for what they actually are. A medical student who must live up to her gold medal, she pores over her books late into the night. She experiments

with the options open to the modern woman: 'greedily' she flips through the 'new-smelling' pages of her 'hard-bound' anatomy book. But she can feel it is not there, or as 'a big doctor-madam' that she will find satisfaction. The illustrations in the medical text reduce the body to lurid colour-coded parts, all labelled and numbered. These pleasures and their promised futures are no match for the nights she has spent in the soft warmth of her grandmother's bed, surrounded by the 'safe, familiar, musty, smell' of the old woman's flesh.

The body that Hariharan's story affirms, firms, re-firms in its citation is 'a solid, reliable thing. . . a wonderful, resilient machine' (p. 10). Nothing seems to have the power to corrode it—neither the violence of a tradition that decrees asceticism and denial, nor that of a modernity which would discipline it in other, multi-coloured yet no-less-ascetic, terms. The canonical authority of this body, the stigmata that proclaims its sainthood however minor and secular-modern that may be, lies in its ability to survive and to resurface, and in its power to effect reiteration across generations and across a social map that includes the young narrator, the author and the reader, a social map that is also a map of a new India.

I began this discussion by saying that 'The Remains of the Feast', can be read as an intervention in a long-standing debate in Indian feminism; indeed that the flaunting of the Hindu-widow protagonist suggests that the author herself might well regard it as a statement of that kind. But what exactly is the feminist statement that the story makes? To the extent that the body that is re-affirmed in the narrative is only incidentally a female body, it is also a feminist body. Let me explain. The narrative does not present widowhood, and the paraphernalia of ritual and taboo that attends it, as gender oppression. The enemy here is not patriarchy, but a social world that fails to sustain the spirit. The victim is fleshly nature itself, not women. The fact that both the characters happen to be female, or that they belong to separate historical times, seems incidental to the main thrust of the narrative which asserts the claim of a natural appetite for life—be it male or female—against an order which seeks to deprive or discipline it. All the same, to take for granted the equality of male and female so completely as to assume that the universal body may be represented by the female

as adequately as the male is, I submit, a feminist stance, as is the old woman's rebellion and her bid for liberation and fulfilment. However—and this is a consequence of its particular feminism—it is also a stance whose impatience towards historical and actually existing Indian feminism (an excess given the resilience of embodied humanity) is evident in the structure of the plot as much as in the narrative tone. Thus, while the suffering and the degradation of the Hindu widow (sati, incarceration, tonsure, the prohibition of remarriage, the denial of her sexuality) were issues that provided the 19th century social reform movements with their mobilising force and in fact shaped their feminism, in this story all that, and indeed widowhood itself, becomes unimportant. We encounter the familiar shaven-headed figure, but search as we will for the pain that roused protest, we will not find it since the victim-widow has been replaced by a body whose robust appetite and Rabelaisian humour is a capable substitute for feminist struggle, then and now. Its good sense is one that can resist both the follies of tradition and the enthusiasms of modernity more effectively than a hundred and fifty years of feminist fanaticism has managed to do.

There are crucial differences that mark off the embodied individual of Hariharan's story from the ascetic, even anti-consumerist widow-figures that emerged in the early years of the 20th century with the swadeshi movement and found a new stint of life a couple of decades later in Gandhian nationalism. These strong, self-reliant figures were emblematic of a culture and society capable of effective counterpoint to colonial ideologies and western notions of the good society. There is much, however that they share, including the fact that for these figures too reform was largely irrelevant.

I turn to the caste politics of this text. It is singularly easy to forget that the feminist salience of the story is based on the fact that its protagonist is not just a Hindu widow but a *brahmin* widow. Her upper-caste status comes into play in a variety of ways. The family own, and continue to own, property in the village which they now manage from the city. For two generations they have been part of Indian officialdom, the new brahmins who also have a stranglehold on the professions—the old woman's son was an administrator, the grandson an accountant. The great

granddaughter is studying to be a doctor. The desires and appetites that drive the plot are structured by the proscriptions that govern a brahmin widow's life. In this story those predictable hungers are updated to include others excited by the more modern pruderies of a colonial middle-class (alcohol, street food, body noises, make-up, female desire) that transform the lot into a metaphor for human appetites, whetted perhaps by denial, but simple human appetites all the same. The family is exemplary in its modernity. They practice nothing that can be called serious discrimination based on caste or gender. The prescriptions of the law are not forced onto the widow; rather, her traditional life in the household signifies the scope of an Indian modernity that can accommodate tradition without compromising its humanism. When the old woman is about to die, they call the doctor, not the priest. There appears to have been no opposition to the young woman studying medicine. In fact there is such a close fit between tradition and modernity, brahminism and secularism, that they signal a natural continuity in the new and altogether persuasive frame that the narrative sets up. The initial terms in both pairs are designated as unnatural and as excesses—whether they be the excesses of ritual proscriptions, secular-modern ambitions (including feminist ones)—which then become the lack or the disorder that drives the narrative.

Theoretically the question of caste is figured into the argument of this story in two distinct, but related ways. First, and perhaps most important, it makes an appearance as the caste system and not as caste discrimination, oppression or expropriation. The older woman can therefore break the hold of caste (which is by now residual, a frail psychological object) by consuming the proscribed foods. Fit (and indeed only) agent for this revolution in brahminism is the modernising brahmin herself. Secondly, the transition from brahminism-tradition to secularism-modernity seems so smooth that there is no reason to presume any substantial conflict there. If the task of the mid-20th century avant-garde was the shaping of a modernity that would select the best from tradition and maintain India's distinct cultural genius as it moved into a scientific future what seems to be required now is the setting up of a third category, premised on embodied nature and political moderation, that must repudiate the ascetic excesses of ritual

brahminism as well as those of a puritanical work/production-oriented spirit of national capital. I do not think it is insignificant, that the late-capitalist, fund-bank widow *consumes* her way to freedom.

If we push beyond the self-deprecating gestures with which the story presents itself we are confronted with a cultural political seriously engaged in the making of a new moment in the genealogy of the Indian citizen as agent-self and as humanist individual. It is a moment in which, a citizen-subject beleaguered by the challenges to its authority that have arisen from the struggles of dalit bahunis, feminists, socialists and a host of others, and drawn by the offer of equality that is held out by a global (free market) liberalism, re-notates those struggles to enable their absorption into its body. As it re-casts the grievances of women and of dalits to present itself as answer, it renders their historical and present-day struggles redundant. The reverse effect is the more significant one: what surfaces in this story as a feisty and irrepressible nature is in fact a body meticulously fashioned as response to movements that threaten its 'identity' and its interests.

To what extent has this embodied and agentive self—or a very similar one—also been the body-self unwittingly affirmed and renewed by historical feminism? What does that norming cost the feminist movement? How might it affect possibilities of egalitarian and democratic alliance or initiative? These are chastening questions and ones that we might learn how to ask as we find our way through the second text I want to discuss: Baburao Bagul's 1969 story about a dalit widow. Not, however, before observing that the brahminical-modernist formation of the citizen-self may be one reason why it has taken me a quarter of a century to learn how to read the feminism of this dalit story.

II

'Not a single dalit woman is either happy or contented from the heart. She is always worried.'

The mandatory summary to begin with. This is a difficult task because unlike a well-made short story which is pared down to a single focus, the plot here is layered like that of a novel and is bustling with character and event. The time-span of the story has

a classical brevity (one evening, seven pages), yet the narrative is structured as a series of episodes that cut from location to location, flashback from the immediate present to the recent and the more distant past, and shift focus from the private world of the subject-self to the outer world of power. I think the only possibility might be to risk brutalization of the structuring of time in Bagul's narrative and present a chronology of events. I hope that the scope and texture of the story can be regained, partially at least, in the discussion.

Sometime before he was born, Pandu's mother and father leave their village and come to the city after the father, in a fit of jealous anxiety, 'almost kills his brother with an axe.' Things are only worse in the city. The mother has to work all day at construction sites to feed the family and pay for milk and medicines. Her husband, drunk and tubercular, is too weak and overwrought with resentment and suspicion of his wife to find work himself. The sexual tension between them builds up and spills out into their already tense world in which abuse and attack are the everyday texture of life, not only for them but for everyone. He accuses her of selling herself for favours, tries repeatedly to deface her, makes an attempt to brand her body with hot tongs; she turns on his dying body in vengeance demanding her 'conjugal rights,' hoping to hasten his death. When he dies, she feels she has killed him. Ten years elapse. She has continued to work, resisting, for her son's sake, the advances of several men, despite desperate need for the material benefit that would accrue. Pandu is at school, but he is miserable. He never smiles, never responds, either to the teacher or to the taunts of other children. His body, Bagul writes, is lead. One evening back from a usual schoolday of attack and abuse, sitting alone in his empty hovel waiting for his mother, hungry yet unable to stomach the cold gruel left for him on the hearth, the small changes in their everyday life begin to 'make sense' to him. He reads them, indeed reads himself in them: new Diwali clothes, a new tilt of his mother's head, a new drape to her clothes, a fresh intensity to the taunts at school and on the street. His mother is a whore. He the son of a When she returns from work, braving that day as everyday the sexual attacks and the moral reprobations of the street through which she must walk

to reach the relative safety of her home, Pāndu turns on her the full force of his pain and resentment. He shouts at her and runs out of the house. I quote:

The room now seemed to her like the cremation grounds. . . . She heard the sound of the dogs in the distance, and thinking he had come back, joyfully opened the door. 'Come son, forgive this old sinner.' The door opened and the overseer stood in the doorway. His massive frame seemed to dwarf everything else in the room.

'What's happened? Why do you look so scared? You are sweating.' He hugged her, pretended to wipe the sweat off her face, and started caressing her arms and her breasts. She slowly responded, and out of the hunger of the past 10 years of widowhood flared an uncontrollable desire. And that was why she failed to hear the timid knock at the door, the faint, hesitant cry, 'Mother!' He saw them, his mother and the towering figure of the overseer in a tight embrace. His last hopes seemed to crash about his head; broken-hearted, he wildly rushed towards the door. She saw him then, strained after him, calling his name, but the overseer, already blinded with lust, refused to let her go; he was pulling her into the room with his strong brown arms. Pāndu was running away at great speed; his fast falling tears had almost blinded him, the stray dogs ran at his heels, snapped at him and now he was screaming, shouting with terror, afraid of the dogs. . . .

She was trying desperately to escape from the bear-like hug of the overseer. But like a person stuck fast in the quagmire, she found release impossible. . . .

A summary of this kind necessarily scants detail and structure. It also excludes from its scope one of the most stunning aspects of the story—what I will call, following Walter Benjamin, a 'linguistic air'. A few comments on this air. For those normed by its procedures, the everyday use of language assumes, indeed can assume, a fit so close between the sign and its referent that the referent saturates the domain of signification. In 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin refers to this mode in which language is used as the linguistic air, arguing that translation rises to (but also exists in/has the bearing of) a higher and purer linguistic air than the original, since a translation is concerned less with the transfer of meaning or information and more with essaying a mode of

signification. The linguistic air in Baburao Bagul's story is related to that of a benjaminian translation, though it is not identical. The linguistic air of a translation draws attention to the signifying system that is another culture. In the nether world of Bagul's story, on the other side of the border in which sign and referent have a natural fit, language does not just thematise another process/mode of signification. In that air reality is self-evidently an effect of the symbolic whose logic is apparent everywhere. Signification is a full-scale materialising and de-materialising force. Events, bodies, persons, objects and selves are signs that have to be cautiously investigated and deciphered if they are to make sense.

In this linguistic air, which is as much the air of real life as it is of the art work, bodies are so wayward that they must be branded; tuberculosis is a caste-mark, memory an aspect of present time and public location: it rushes in from the world to habilitate a personal past; a body-subject whose 'life' is not affirmed by another spirals rapidly back into insignificance. There can be no leisure in this world that must move to the busy beat of an elsewhere, no time for pause, no occasion for consolidation for reader or storyteller. Nothing holds, nothing stands still, nothing may be taken for granted. It is the symbolic that gives birth to subjects, and tempts their dreams with agency while it watches ceremoniously over their many and rapid deaths. A single death would indeed be a comfort.

In addition, the subject in this nether world is not 'impossible' simply because agency is an effect of discipline, or because it is in process, or because it is not affirmed in citation-reiteration, or indeed because one and one can never actually make a One, an integral whole, and there is always a remainder. It is impossible because it is constantly annihilated.

Gita Hariharan's widow-story is about the assertion of life that makes death itself a sort of fruition, a celebratory feast. 'Mother' could well be read as the drama of life and death in the scene of the untouchable family. The narrative turns us into witnesses as mother, son, husband, wife, lover, suitor, man, woman and child give birth, one to another, and die, kill, desire or imagine the death of the other in a series of overlapping acts of affirmation and denial. Indeed the story opens with a longish account of one

such coming-to-life and its death. Normally indifferent and listless, 'backward' children thrill to 'a new joy of being' as they listen to a teacher read out a poem about a mother who is a river of life, a *Vatsalya Sindhu*. The poem 'transports' them into another realm and their 'muddy faces sh[il]ne with a strange wonder' as they smile "happily through their unkempt hair". Enabled by the poem to map those mythic proportions onto memories of his own mother, the young protagonist, Pandu, magically comes to life as 'a child'. A body, stooped with the load of his living, straightens into normality. It returns to him, rather, it returns him to himself: he wants to shout, to wave his arms about in joy. The new propriety also finds this untouchable housing in a community: "the hostility he usually felt towards his classmates abated somewhat. He sat watching them at play and a benign smile slowly came to his face".

Sealing the contract of reconciliation between secured self and habitable world is the high point of Pandu's new-found happiness and vitality: the assertion of his own ability to exclude another. 'Snotnose': he and Lakhu shout out at another boy in spontaneous consolidation of their exuberant togetherness. The poem he listens to in class literally has the power to inspire Pandu. It breathes him into brief life as son, as child and as 'touchable' member of a community. It gives him a mother. But the imaginary interpellation is hardly born before its life is snuffed out by another more compelling one: 'Don't touch Pandu, any of you. My mother says his mother. . .'. Kishan's yell and the laughter it elicits from the class drains Pandu of life: he slowly returns to his seat and sits down 'woodenly'.

It is a double murder this—of child and mother and—one that will be insistently re-enacted, elaborated and related to other dramas of life and death in the story. The domain of the symbolic sustains all life and demands merciless maintenance of its extraditions and death sentences of which there are many kinds. There are those rehearsed in the desperate masquerades that play at and endorse power in the very face of powerlessness (Bhaga the school-rowdy, Dagdu his community role model, the jealous husband, the sexually-demanding wife.) Thus,

Bhaga put up his shirt collar . . . like a street rowdy, squared his lips and told Pandu. "You bloody pimp. Just come out. I'm going to murder

you". He removed a rusty old blade from his note book and threateningly placed it at Pandu's throat.

More characteristic of this world, however, are the real murders, not these make-believe ones. Those involve the actual or desired elimination of a killer(s) and are posthumous acts of self-defence in which a murdered person must kill in order that he or she may live again. Thus, orphaned by Kishan's remarks, Pandu feels a "demonic, murderous rage rising within him. He could have killed them, murdered them all in cold blood. It was good to think of them lying together in a pool of blood." Walking back from school that evening Pandu encounters a drunken Dagdu. He is scared, but when Dagdu, jealous and depressed, insults his mother, Pandu loses "his childlike feelings as the murderous fires continued to haunt him; he felt like hurling a heavy rock at Dagdu's swaying, retreating form and his mind's eye was luridly coloured by the spraying blood that he imagined would gush out of Dagdu's head."

Structurally analogous to the many deaths, murders, births and re-births that constitute Pandu's life, is the coming-to-life and new death of Pandu's mother, the murder she commits, the ones she dreams of committing, the ones committed on her. For a man in his world, a wife's youth or her beauty are not sources of joy but of anxiety and emasculation. Beauty is the property mark of the world across the border, a branding. A beautiful woman is one who has been picked out by its laws, one whose life is held by its designs and its assumptions. To make a beautiful woman his wife, to hold her in that esteemed position and thereby to affirm his own proper masculinity, his status as husband, a man must erase those marks which are also the marks of his emasculation, his dispossession, the impossibility of personhood. Pandu's father's blows, therefore, were always aimed at destroying [his wife's] full-blown beauty. He hoped she would lose a lot of blood, become lame, deformed, ugly and so in spite of his ebbing strength, he would aim at her face, nose, head, eyes. Then he threatened to kill her when she was asleep. He blamed her entirely for his disease, his failing strength, his joblessness.

For similar reasons, he would rather "die, allow this child to die", than let his brother, who looks at his wife with 'lust in his eyes' anywhere near them. For Pandu's father, this brother is the

most dreaded of mirrors, one into which he cannot bear to look, for he sees there the image of his own utter degradation/death in one who is his own flesh and blood. To survive he must break that mirror—kill, even his brother.

For the woman who is Pandu's mother, the memories that haunt are those of the "most degrading act of the day" when her husband would strip her and scrupulously check out her body and its clothing for marks of her infidelity. The break point comes when she wakes up one night to find him heating tongs to brand her body, to mark it indelibly, to burn into it the sign of his possession. It will be a mark of power, indeed of patriarchal power, but it is at the same time a mark of his desperation. It is she now who turns to the kill. She will demand—and like the demands that he makes on her, this too is an excessive, impossible demand for his falling tubercular body—she will demand that he husband her, and in the process push him into death. She will want to murder her son too when she recognises in his eyes the 'same dark suspicion' she has seen before—in the eyes of his father.

Like Pandu, who momentarily comes alive in the promise of the poem, she too glimmers into brief life in the arms of the overseer at the construction site. With the affirmation he provides she can walk straight, 'secure in her newfound love'. Her mirror now refracts a different light and she grows desirable in her own eyes as much as in his. But for this dalit to find bodily life thus, as woman-self, she must die as mother. "Whore, I spit on your clothes", Pandu shouts in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to conserve his ethical identity before he runs out of the house into his death as son-child.

III

For a feminist reader hitherto secured in her well-made upper-caste world, the story is epiphanic. It eases open and displays totally different logic to a violence that has hitherto been described to her only in terms that distance and repudiate it as—and I can think of no better example than the comment by the celebrated playwright Vijay Tendulkar cited in his foreword to Bagul's book—"uneducated, uncultured, abnormal." It is a logic that (i) implicates both her and her world anew, since it replaces the mark of this

extradited 'other' on the many institutions, familial, psychic, ethical, that ground her personal, and therefore as a feminist also her political, life and (ii) renews her understanding of patriarchy and the subjugations that structure and sustain it.

For the widow-mother protagonist—and for the dalit feminist—nothing comes so easily, yet there is in the story the stirring of a new kind of movement: from the never-ceasing shuttle between the extraditions and deaths that comprise her impossible life, to a struggle to leave, and in that single act to re-notate the world. It is a movement, not so much to demand entry into the many temples of the contemporary world, but to re-designate and rework those institutions. The beginnings of a movement, possibly from untouchable-harijan to dalit..

But what exactly is untouchability in this dalit story? I think it is significant that Baburao Bagul refers to each of the interpretative frameworks that address the caste question, but takes issue with all of them. Thus, both *varnashramadharma* (and untouchability as it is configured in that brahminical-colonial-Gandhian scheme of scholarship and politics) and sanskritisation (Indian sociology's attempt to modernise brahminism by transforming it into a question of consent and aspiration and not bigotry or exploitation) are noted emblematically. It is easy to provide examples: the Hindu(?) widow is the central figure, the move from the village to the city sets the plot in motion, the narrative opens with the child's desire for a mother who is a *Vatsalya Sindhu*, "Don't touch Pandu, any of you," Kishan yells out. The question of consent, more specifically the question of what exactly constitutes consent for subject that stands thus, askew, in the grids of citizenship—is thematic in this story which might well be read as an extended discussion of the dynamics of that single issue. However, in the citation-retheorisation occasioned by this story each of these classical objects of political theory are so transformed that they are virtually, yet not totally, unrecognisable. In contrast, the question of political economy is addressed, and its effects insistently documented. We are told that the children in the community are backward and ill-nourished, the family immiserated, the father tubercular and jobless, the mother slaves at a construction site for the pittance that will put a meal a day into their bellies, lower-caste women

live in constant fear of sexual attack, the unemployed hang around the basti, drunk and depressed, or move around in lumpen-rowdy gangs. Here too the objects are emblematic, but they are recognisable as those of a Nehruvian/socialist scheme of things. Structurally however, the narrative accords neither political economy nor history the status of an interpretative horizon. Work, wages, property, expropriation all figure here, as does the aspiration for a wholesome humanity. But they are drawn into a frame that re-works the discursive logic of untouchability as it proposes a theory of caste (i) as extraditions that are revised and renewed by a brahminism that is constantly updating its patriarchy; (ii) as desire in the scene of the family; and (iii) as bodies that are compelled by, but disallowed contract into the feminine or masculine; bodies, therefore, that shuttle, always deficient, always in excess. In brief, as terror in the domain of the citizen-subject.

If in modern Indian literature the choice of the widow as protagonist should be read as an announcement that the text is an intervention in feminist theory, how might we describe the political/theoretical moves that are being made by the texts that we have been discussing? It seems to me that the stories represent two of the most powerful contesting forces within feminism today. On the one hand the pressures of a re-empowered middle class whose fund-bank aspirations are global, and who must re-make its humanism to suit. On the other the questions raised by the dalit movement, terrifying and full of promise.

(This paper was presented at a seminar on 'Femininity, the Female Body and Sexuality in Contemporary Society' held at the Nehru Memorial Library in November 1994. Subsequent versions were read at Columbia and Cornell Universities, SUNV at Syracuse, the Universities of Pennsylvania and Michigan and the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. I am grateful to the each of these audiences as well as to other members of the Subaltern Studies editorial collective and my research students for stimulating discussion. Special thanks is due to Satish Poddval and Mary John for their detailed and extremely useful comments.)

Published in Economic and Political Weekly, June 1, 1996, pp. 1311–1315.

Understanding Sirasgaon

Notes Towards Conceptualising the Role of Law, Caste and Gender in a Case of "Atrocity"

ANUPAMA RAO

The task of a critique of violence can be summarized as that of expounding its relation to law and justice.

Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Reflections*, 276.

Prelude

This essay has two concerns. One has to do with understanding an "atrocity" involving the stripping and parading naked of four dalit women, which took place in village Sirasgaon, Gangapur Taluka, Aurangabad District, Maharashtra, on the 22nd of December 1963. The second has to do with some general issues involving the production of knowledge *about* dalit women, and what kinds of narratives may be mobilized when discussing anthropological encounters that touch upon differences of caste and gender. I hope the essay provides some points of departure for talking about questions of dalitness and gender from regional contexts. I mark the importance of juridical discourse in mediating our notions of the caste-marked, gendered citizen-subject, pointing simultaneously to some dangers inherent in producing academic knowledge about dalit women without attention to the institutional and historical context within which the differences between upper-caste women and others might be produced.

In understanding contemporary dalit identity as it emerges through the state's attempts to tackle the problem of "atrocities" against dalits, I am most interested in the significance of the break between colonial and post-colonial policies regarding caste crime, i.e., the modalities whereby the practice of various forms of untouchability are both elaborated and disciplined. Drawing on this

critical break in the understanding of how untouchability and its practices are situated within the body politic, I try to understand how dalit women are constituted through moments of crisis managed by the legal apparatus.

Dalitness and “difference”

Recently, there have been propositions from many quarters that dalit women and their lives constitute a site of *difference*, standing at an oblique to the questions and strategies that have been adopted by a mainstream, upper-caste feminism.¹ (Guru 1995, Jogdand 1995, Ilaiah 1996, Tharu 1996). This argument has been made in two rather distinct ways. Loosely speaking, these pertain to the life-worlds of theorizing and writing about social reality, and to that other space where people live their lives, which cannot be encompassed by the confined and distanced ways of being intrinsic to knowledge production. The question arises as to how we are to make sense of realities that we cannot and do not live, the methods we are to adopt in talking about them, and in including them as valuable sites for inquiry.² This problem emerges not just as one of accommodating difference within our academic life-worlds, but also as a question for politics: how can a theorization of dalit women's difference be politically valuable for us today, when we run the risk of appropriating dalit women's lived realities through inaccessible modes of theorization and textualisation that point to a persistent neo-Brahmanism in the modes of academic conversation?

The contemporary politics of caste knits together an upper-caste politics of guilt, apology, and fetishisation of dalit abjection which is in conversation with radical anti-caste struggle and dalit autobiographical self-fashioning. There is a lack of fit between the means whereby these historically situated discourses (of upper-caste progressive and radical dalits, to simplify enormously here) have arrived at dalitness and gender as problems to be thought *together* in our political present.

Thus, while it is important to attack the more mobile and subtle forms of the “new” Brahmanism, and struggle against the continued violence against bodies marked dalit by the state apparatus, it might be politically expedient to disarticulate strands within the

anti-caste struggle in order to maintain a historical sensibility about the position upper-caste progressives occupy with regard to radical dalit polemics and militant action.³ This is not meant to advocate a politics of authenticity. Rather it is to underscore the historical context within which persistent discourses on dalitness and upper-caste "being" have occurred, so as to better engage with the contradictory and sometimes problematic ways in which alliance and empathy are formed.

Feminists, brahmanical feminists, and the problem of gender

These are difficult questions to pose, especially if one also wants to unravel the logic that animates them. Perhaps it would be useful to speculate on this impasse, where one does not really know the *effects* of currently dominant modes of inquiry, so that it makes us more careful to historicise our arguments. I return to the question of politics: how do we imagine a politics of difference where the deeply entangled histories of upper-caste feminism and dalit women (resting quite centrally on the history of caste, desire, and violence, *and* the problematic Brahmanical discourse on women) confront each other. How do Brahmanical feminists talk to dalit feminists in a situation where: a) the history of the discourse on "women", and b) the current paradox of upper-caste feminists having the luxury, in some sense, to escape their caste persona through a turn to the (progressive) problem of gender and "women", are part and parcel of a Brahmanical discourse whose history has moved toward marking itself as anti-caste, progressive, and feminist? That is to say, what politics is possible when Brahmanical feminism is interested in asserting, in the deepest sense, that feminism and caste cannot sit together.⁴

We might see Brahmanical feminism as a shorthand for referring to a highly selective understanding of women and their lives which has been unable to incorporate significant mediations (in this instance, caste) that inflect the structures of living in and through diverse patriarchies in the Indian context. If caste makes for a difference in the kind and quality of patriarchal control, it does so not only for those dalit women who are seen to bear the excesses of such caste patriarchy, but also for those feminists whose

caste specificity is seen to be elided through the adoption of the term "feminist". Hence Brahmanical feminism is the possibility of occupying a feminist position outside caste: *the possibility of denying caste as a problem for gender*.

The adoption of a position that privileges gender to the exclusion of all else allows the very talk of caste to be seen as a threat to the radicalization of gender sensibilities and the understanding of oneself as a woman with all its ramifications. Hence speaking as a woman involves the forgetting of the caste self, and caste historicity. The problems of "speaking" and voice then become part of a gendered problematic of the self, where even speaking differently is hijacked by a meta-discourse which refuses to allow for the active construction of a gendered caste self. Instead, speaking differently allows one to affirm and reaffirm the already-constructed differences (i.e. dalit women experience more sexual harassment, dalit women suffer as workers as well as women, etc.) that allow Brahmanical feminism to stand firmly in place as an anti-caste discourse in the most regressive sense of that term.

The alienation of dalit women from the mainstream upper-caste feminism raises the problem of the troubling connections between caste and patriarchy. In such a scenario, Brahmanical feminism is marked by a problematic entanglement with contemporary problems of "voicing" and the ethical encounter with the "other". This dilemma is often transmuted to one of political action and organizing, such that the different interests of dalit women often get read through the acceptance of a dalit feminism that *complements* the aims of mainstream feminism, at best.⁵ In order to further question such sensibilities, we will have to necessarily begin by framing the current interest in making the dalit woman (or dalit women) a problem and a fetish. Why is everyone interested in dalit women as the most subaltern of subalterns; why we are drawn to the *extremes* of Indian society as a meaningful place from where we might speak about social reality? This attempt to look to the outermost edges of ways of being runs the risk of simplifying—rather than complicating—our ethics and politics if it is done at the cost of understanding the *relations* between diverse life-worlds and ways of being; if it allows us to escape the

responsibility for the production of a certain sort of narrative, a particular depiction of dalit women in our limited and incomplete modes of making knowledge.

This might be seen as a first step towards asking other critical questions about the nature of communities of women who might join together in fighting varied caste patriarchies, and the means whereby questions of dalit patriarchy itself are to be posed and countered. *I will take as a fundamental assumption the existence of caste-specific patriarchies.* While they may be inflected by the hegemonic interests of a Brahmanical structure where questions of control over sexuality, and the centrality of women to the value of the community are critical, (Chakravarti, 1993) there are parallel processes of patriarchal control over women within caste-communities which cannot be reduced to movements of upward mobility or imitation, as Rosalind O'Hanlon (1994), for instance argues, in the case of Maratha women in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Maharashtra. I wonder if we might not talk of an imitation-with-difference when it comes to talking about non-Brahman patriarchies, and their representations of their women, where there is a critique of Brahmanical social reform at the same time that Brahmanical models are adopted for the consolidation of a new (Maratha) patriarchy.⁶ The notion of imitation-with-a-difference makes even more sense if we dwell on the fact that the experience of varied caste positions cannot but mean that one participates in, yet retains a historical and political distance from, the dominant structures whose discourses attempt to stifle other ways of caste being.

To the extent that all these ways of caste being involve the control and suppression of women, there are commonalities that cut across caste barriers. But the experiences of sexual violence are diversely patterned given the caste history involved. While processes of upward mobility, or attempts to establish dominance, involve women and their control in central ways, there might be other ways of configuring sexuality, violence, and desire in caste-specific realms. At the same time, recent attempts to think about dalit women's specific experiences and struggles have also made it obvious that we need to bring in men (Brahman, dalit, Maratha,

OBC) as critical factors that affect the caste-marked processes of gendering.

I hope to work through some of the problems I have raised here more concretely in the section that follows.

I

What is the nature of a narrative constructed by the state regarding the problem of caste, gender, and violence? How does the state represent such an event of “atrocities”, as it has come to be called, in the context of a constitutional dictate abolishing untouchability (and its resultant disabilities)?

Article 17 of the Indian Constitution reads: “‘Untouchability’ is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of ‘untouchability’ shall be an offense in accordance with law.”⁷ Significantly Ambedkar, in his draft on the Fundamental Rights, had suggested the provision that: “Any privilege or disability arising out of rank, birth, person, family, religion or religious usage and custom is abolished.” This was accepted neither by the Draft Committee nor by the Constituent Assembly. In Ambedkar’s draft the issue of privilege and disability, excess and deprivation, retard the attainment of equality and citizenship in the abstract. Ambedkar locates the problem of untouchability in the context of differential access to secular and religious power and legitimation, and while arguing for untouchability’s abolition, provides an account of its existence.

Article 17 does not situate untouchability amongst prevalent socio-political practices, hence cannot encompass the context within which its existence and abolition become necessary.⁸ Another danger in the phrasing of Article 17 is that it comes into conflict with Article 26 of the Constitution, which guarantees religious denominations the right of existence. Castes in the form of sects have the right to exist and maintain their own religious and charitable institutions. Article 17 might also be undercut by Article 30 which provides that religious and linguistic minorities have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. In arguing for a context-sensitive decision regarding practices of untouchability, while allowing simultaneously for

the persistence of group solidarities, the Constitution contradicts its own intentions of doing away with caste disability.⁹

I will turn slowly to the details of the Sirasgaon case, which were available to me through the various judgements of the Judicial Magistrate First Class, the Sessions Judge, as well as the oral judgement of the Bombay High Court Judge, which I found at the District and Sessions Court, Aurangabad. In addition, I consulted newspaper coverage of the event in the *Marathwada*, a newspaper run mainly by socialists of that region, which is published from Aurangabad city.¹⁰ I should mention that I chose to pursue the "Sirasgaon case" after hearing about it from almost everyone I spoke to regarding the question of caste violence. It was the first big case of "atrocities" after the formation of Maharashtra in 1960, and it is a landmark case in Maharashtra with regard to dalit women after the passage of the 1955 Abolition of Untouchability (Offences) Act.¹¹ The fact that the case was not registered as one of "atrocities" is important, and its implications can be gauged from the discussion that follows.

The Fifth Report of the Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (April 1982, March 1983) noted that "atrocities" was not a legal term. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, the term implies offences under the Indian Penal Code perpetrated on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. "[W]here the victims of crime are members of Scheduled Castes and the offenders do not belong to Scheduled Castes, caste considerations are really the root cause of crime, even though caste consciousness may not be the vivid and immediate motive for the crime." (mentioned in Gupta, 1994: 23, and cited in Awasthi 1994: 159) The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, for the first time provides incidents and situations of "atrocities" in Section 3, in working towards its legal definition. Section 7(1) (d) of the Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1955, which is often read along with Section 3, covers an insult or attempt to insult a member of the Scheduled Castes on the ground of untouchability. Section 7(1) (d) is wider in its coverage of instances of insult, as 3(x) of the Prevention of Atrocities Act only covers the caste of insult or humiliation of a member of the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes *in public*. It

should be emphasized that an “atrocity” only comes to have meaning if it is undergirded by a notion of untouchability as its real cause. As mentioned earlier, Article 17 does not define untouchability, but assumes its existence in abolishing it!¹²

Before I recount the narrative as it is offered by juridical discourse, I offer a portion of my fieldnotes where I record the event as I first heard it. I do so in order to provide a glimpse into the way the case is remembered today, and to present to the reader the significance of remembering the case as having started from a quarrel over filling water at the common water source (one of the stereotypical “causes” of caste conflict), rather than the complicated and unknowable issues of desire, transgression, and retribution spoken about in the legal judgment. At the same time, I want to look closely at the attribution of shame to speaking about what “really” happened; that the women are said to have given evidence initially that they were verbally abused. This potentially clears the police machinery of having fabricated this event, and begins to suggest the reticence of the victims as a possible reason for botching the case. Here the issue of shame legitimates a lie [“nothing happened”], while at the same time holding out the possibility of a private appropriation of what “really” happened within the dalit community. This then allows for the public narrative to be hijacked by the men of the community who carried the case to the end. Other than functioning as victims in a story of overall dalit humiliation, the women do not make an appearance in the story. Both these issues will become important later on, when I try to argue about the problems encountered in discussing “intention” regarding cases of gendered caste violence.

In the spirit of protecting the identity of my informant, I have chosen to merely name my source S. This became necessary in view of the fact that S is a government servant who was extremely conscious of the fact that he was providing me with information “off the record”. Here I have kept the description of place vague, and emphasized what I heard, rather than how I came to hear it. As I mentioned earlier, by bringing this episode within the contours of this essay, I want to suggest something about the way that landmark cases get mis-remembered, and the ways in which S’s narrative dovetails with the state’s, especially around the reading

of the humiliation of the dalit women. What is important to note, however, is the means whereby S situated this event in the larger context of the way that cases involving dalit women were downplayed as compared to the harassment and molestation of upper-caste women. In doing so, S displays a remarkably keen sense of the upper-caste biases that reveal themselves through small instances. At the same time, S's response to the lawyer for the accused, where he argued that this was not a "dalit" case, but a case involving the humiliation of "women", reveals the insuperable contradictions that exist between caste and gender consciousness, and the difficulties in bringing them together in analysis.

The law's reading

The case of stripping and parading Laxmibai Vithal Amrita Sirsat, and her three daughters-in-law, Sonabai, Kadubai, and Sakrabai took place on December 22, 1963 during the late morning, at about 10 a.m. and thereafter. The incident was preceded by a quarrel between Vithal Amrita Sirsat's youngest son Kishan, an agricultural worker, and his employer Yedu Kale. Approximately six months before the incident, Kishan's wife Sonabai had gone to the fields carrying his breakfast. As the judgement notes in its brief description of the events of the case:

While returning, some gestures were made to her [Sonabai] by Yedu Kale calculated to outrage her modesty. [Sonabai] had narrated the incident to her mother-in-law Laxmibai. The two had approached Yedu's wife Shevantibai. She apologized on behalf of her husband. However about a week before 22-12-1963 Kishan declared his intention of discontinuing Yedu's work. That time he suggested [to] Shevantibai that he had taken very ill of the incident with Sonabai and asked her to imagine what she would have felt if Kishan himself was to touch her Sari or to outrage her modesty. Perhaps Shevantibai spoke about it to her husband with some relishments.

Yedu Kale and the other accused went to the house of Vithal Amrita on December 22, 1963 at 9:30–10 a.m. armed with sticks, and demanded to see Kishan. Kishan was away, and when Vithal asked the reason for the visit. "He was told that Kishan had played mischief with his [Yedu's] wife." Yedu began to beat Vithal while

his two other sons, Mohan and Lahanu, ran away. Kishan saw the crowd at his house as he was returning, and ran away, only to show up a week later. Laxmibai was beaten as well, and her sari removed by Asaram Dada Agale (accused 4), while Tukaram Bhika Kale and Tukaram Dashrath Sirsat (Accused 2 and 3 respectively) removed Sonabai's sari. The two naked women were then dragged towards the village from the Budh *vadh* (what used to be called Mahar *vada* at the outskirts of the village).¹³ At about this time, Nana Trimbak Sirsat, Bajirao Dashrath Sirsat, Ambadas Dasrath Sirsat, Kishan Khandu Sirsat, Patilba Bandu Kale, and Shivram Laxman Kale (accused 5–10) rushed into Vital Amrita's house and dragged Kadubai and Sakrabai outside, where they were beaten.¹⁴ Bajirao Dashrath Sirsat removed Kadubai's sari, while Kishan Khandu Sirsat removed Sakrabai's. All four women were taken in a parade to the *ves*, or entrance to the village, being beaten all the while with sticks. Their palms, which they used to cover their genitals, were also beaten with sticks. On their way to the *ves*, the accused forced Laxmibai and Sonabai to stand in front of Yedu Kale's house, so that Shevantibai could see them. After some time, the accused suggested that the women go away, and threw a sari towards them, which all four of them used to cover themselves and walk home.

Enter the state machinery

When the women returned to their home, they sent their neighbour Keshav Rama to village Malunja (a mile away) to contact their relative Trimbak Ramji, Vithal's nephew, and Natha Baba, Laxmibai's brother. Natha Baba was not to be found, but Trimbak Ramji came to Sirasgaon, and then went to Gangapur (taluka headquarters about six miles away), where he consulted members of the Republican Party of India (RPI) before writing an application to the Police Sub-Inspector (PSI). The PSI entered the incident in the station diary before accompanying Trimbak Ramji and Sankharam Khajekar (an RPI activist) to Sirasgaon. The PSI had also asked his head constable, Navrange, to despatch more constables. PSI Patil, who made an entry in the station diary, was not in charge of the police station at that time, and assumed charge in order to investigate the incident.

In Sirasgaon, PSI Patil made a *panchnama*, and asked his constables to escort the four women and Vithal Amrita to the Medical Officer in Gangapur, to record the injuries.¹⁵ But the injured were not taken to Gangapur that night, because the cart carrying them was stopped midway due to a message which said that the PSI had asked the party to return. Constable Shivdas, who had accompanied the cart gave a statement that when he was asked to turn back, he asked for a written statement to that effect from the PSI, which Sahebrao Dashrath Sirsat, brothers of accused 3, 6, and 7, promised to get. As they waited, Constable Salunkhe had come back with word from the PSI to turn back. Sahebrao had been centrally involved in obstructing the cart's trip to Gangapur, and the next morning he had visited Vithal Amrita and attempted to bribe him to hush up the matter. Simultaneously he had suggested that the family's life in Sirasgaon would be made unbearable.¹⁶ However, the cart went ahead to Gangapur, where the Medical Officer recorded the injuries of the accused at 4 p.m.¹⁷ The Gangapur police had registered the incident as a "non-cognisable offence" under the PSI's instructions, while Navrange had suggested to Vithal Amrita that he should look to fighting his case privately in a magistrate's court.

In the meantime, Vithal's son Mohan had returned, and suspecting that the PSI was trying to hush up the case, he wrote an application which he presented again to the PSI narrating details of the assault and the naked procession. It was only after receiving Mohan's application on 24-12-63 that PSI Patil started investigation of a cognisable offence. The judgement notes that:

The application which is registered by the PSI contains a paragraph showing that the case of parading was not mentioned earlier because the ladies were bashful of disclosing the same. However, it is the case of Mohan that this paragraph was added only at the instance of PSI Patil . . . PSI had asked him [Mohan] to change the same [i.e., the earlier application] and hence the change was done. He produced Ex. 63 [the old application returned to him by PSI Patil] when the Circle Police Inspector Wangikar took over the charge of the investigation.

After this, the PSI recorded the women's statements, and filed

offences under Sections 147, 323, 354 and 448 of the Indian Penal Code.¹⁸ On 25-12-63 Patil went to Sirasgaon to draw up the *panchnama* of the scene of the offence, and on 26-12-63 all the accused including an eleventh one who was later acquitted by the magistrate, were arrested.¹⁹ On 3-1-64 the four women were sent to Aurangabad Medical College to see if there had been injuries to their private parts. On 9-1-64 Patil handed over the case to Circle Inspector Wangikar, who pursued it until 30-1-64 when the charge-sheet against the accused was filed.

The statements of the accused

The accused denied their involvement in the case, and said they were falsely implicated. In their depositions they repeatedly maintain that they were falsely involved in the case, and this was due to a long-standing feud between them and Asaram Bhusare, who was in league with the "harijans". The rationale offered by them about the injuries suffered by the four women and Vithal Amrita was that the women had brought water through the village, and a scuffle had ensued when the *savarnas* [caste Hindus] in front of whose homes the women had passed, protested.²⁰ Yedu Kale made contradictory statements. One suggested that he had gone to Vithal Amrita's house to enquire about Kishan's sudden absence from work, and to retrieve Rs 200 owed him. At the same time, Kale maintained that at the time of the said incident, he was entertaining guests who had come to see Gajaba Kale's son for a girl from Malunja. Accused 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10 maintained that they were engaged in their fields, or had work outside Sirasgaon. In the cross-examination it emerged that there was also a factional fight in the village, with Yedu Kale leading one group, while Asaram Bhusari, the *upasarpanch* of the *gram panchayat* led the other. The *upasarpanch*'s sister had been deserted by Yedu Kale some fifteen years back.²¹

In passing his decision, the magistrate (Taluka Court) had found ten of the eleven accused guilty, and maintained that

PSI Patil had terribly erred in his duty when he tried to shelter the accused and minimize the offence as much as possible. The high principle of social equality for the poor harijans who were at the

mercy of the other villagers was in his opinion trampled upon without any regard to modesty or humanity. He desired to put down this animal instinct . . .

In appealing the verdict, the accused had argued that the case was concocted, and that PSI Patil had behaved in full faith as a police officer. The appellate court decided that there were a few points that needed to be clarified: whether appellants had formed an unlawful assembly, whether force or violence had been used by any member of the unlawful assembly in pursuance of a common goal, whether members of the unlawful assembly had trespassed on Vithal Amrita's property, whether they caused hurt, or grievous hurt, whether they outraged the modesty of the women, whether they had committed an obscene act in stripping the women and parading them naked, whether the acts noted above had been committed by the members of the unlawful assembly with their sense of participation in the assembly, and in pursuance of a common goal.²² The judge held that only the intention to commit grievous harm had not been proved satisfactorily. In addition, the Sessions Judge went into the possible motives behind the stripping, and it is to this that I will now turn.

II

Discovering intention

In understanding the caste particulars, and the incident itself, the appellate judge engaged in a bit of "guesswork," as he put it. I see it as a contextualisation of the case where the socio-cultural facts surrounding the case became all important. Rather than seeing this "guesswork" as an unprofessional extension of judicial reasoning, I see it as a necessary moment in the making of juridical reason, especially as it concerns the common understanding of caste disabilities. The legal context is but an extension of a socio-political world where the common-sensical understanding of "the harijan" is that she/he suffers civic disabilities because she/he is "harijan", after all.²³

This tautological mode of reasoning is clearly exhibited by Judge Dighe, which allows him to maintain a surprising silence on the motives behind the stripping, one based on the relations between "harijans" and upper-castes in the village. In that sense,

the prevalence of a caste habitus, if we can call it that, is taken for granted to such an extent that it need not animate judicial explanation of the event at all. Rather, the socio-political context of Sirasgaon is alluded to through reference to signs that are read as transparent. To that extent, Dighe's judgment itself invokes, and works through, a complicity between judgement and (an obvious) reality. Rather than establishing the practices whereby caste distinctions are maintained—through this instance of stripping, for instance, or other cases of insult and harassment—the existence of untouchability becomes the unspoken ground on which the judgement rests.²⁴ This in turn allows for a judicial argument that rests on distraction.

The ambivalence exhibited by the judgement's shuttling between a sort of Gandhian moral outrage, and the resort to technical and procedural niceties keeps shifting the registers of the judgement, such that just as we expect to have a judgement wholly based on procedural inconsistency, Dighe poses the problems of how to do away with the social evil of untouchability, or attempts to read intention wholly through the positing of a caste mind at work in rural Marathwada. To that extent, the judicial arguments "work" by constantly distracting us from that unspoken impossible: an elaboration of what untouchability is. Thereby the errors of PSI Patil become the defining features of the caste, rather than the event of the stripping. Though the judge is animated by a sense of social justice, that sensibility is *misplaced*. It rests on fighting for the victims' justice in the face of an errant police machinery which has most probably colluded with the accused, reflected in the *procedural inconsistencies* of the case. While an unspoken understanding of the conditions of possibility for the incident's occurrence seems to exist, it is transferred onto a language of logic, procedure, evidence, etc. undergirded by a moral critique.²⁵ We do not find an argument about the meaning of the case in the context of other acts of untouchability and/or caste-related violence. Condemning the immorality of the act of stripping is seen to compensate for a political commentary on relationships of caste and patriarchy that were recreated through the Sirasgaon case.

For instance, Judge Dighe interpreted Kishan's act of speaking

to Shevantibai about Yedu's harassment of his wife, as "lowering the prestige and status of an influential agriculturalist like him", and went on to note that accused 1-4 were rich and influential persons. Meanwhile, he noted:

The social conditions of the Harijans could not be said to be as yet any way much better than what they were previously when they were called and believed untouchables. It is not unlikely, therefore, that Yedu should flurry up into a rage when a boy like Kishan had the audacity to enquire with Shevantibai in a straightforward manner making humiliating suggestions as to what she would feel if he were to outrage her modesty. . . . The alleged incident with Sonabai which is denied by the defence took place some six months back. Yedu is said to have shown her money and held her Padar [the edge of the sari which wraps around the breasts and hangs down] According to Sonabai and Laxmibai they complained to Shevantibai who asked them not to make the matter public. *One cannot say that the thing must have happened altogether.* [my emphasis].

Here Dighe is unwilling to believe the reality of Sonabai's humiliation, yet reads the transaction between Kishan and Shevantibai as an insult to Yedu Kale. It is Dighe's imagination of what an influential agriculturalist would have felt like, that is, imagining himself in that position of privilege, which allows him to interpret the incident "correctly". Moreover, the changing status of dalits in the village is indexed through Kishan's attempts to be "free" with Shevantibai, but nowhere does Dighe read the thwarting of this social change through the persistence of instances such as Yedu's attempts to seduce Sonabai. Yet Dighe took issue with the defence's attempts to discredit the incident by arguing that the gap of six months between Yedu's alleged harassment, Kishan's comments to Shevantibai, and Yedu Kale's retaliation rendered the motive intangible. Dighe wrote "Actually the prosecution need not prove any motive. We have to look to the circumstances and other evidence for finding the guilt."

The circumstance was one that the judge himself did not know fully, as he noted while commenting on the unseemly flight of Vithal Amrita's sons from the scene of the offence. Dighe notes:

Perhaps it is possible to interpret that both the sides are not making

full breast of the previous incident if any. When one bears in mind that the ladies were subjected to attack and humiliation, it is not unlikely that something connected with the females may have happened, and yet it has not come forward before the Court in so many words, I would be blamed for making a guess work but I am saying this only to disprove the suggestion that the motive does not exist. Perhaps it has come forward in a distorted manner . . .

[In replying to the defence, who argued that the case was improbable] It is said that it looks very unnatural that no person came forward and no human being should be there to help the poor ladies. It is further said that the case about parading the ladies is unbelievable, inasmuch as, they are alleged to have been taken through the streets lined with number of houses and it seems improbable that no inmate of the house not even a female one should come forward for their rescue. The argument is worth consideration. If the incident has happened, its tragic effect is heightened because no one has dared to come forward for helping the poor women. Instead of, therefore, coming to the conclusion that since no one came to their rescue, the whole story is concocted, it would be better to analyse the evidence on record . . . to find out why the bystanders could not have come ahead for succour. It is here that the complexion of communal tension or the communal aspect has to be rightly appreciated. However much one may say that Harijans are living in a cordial atmosphere, the very suggestion given by the defence that they were subjected to attack because they used a prohibited road while carrying water pots goes to give an insight into the mind of the so called Hindus of higher strata.

These are the relevant parts of the judgement.²⁶ The "circumstances" surrounding the incident are the social world of the victims and the accused. While Dighe feigns ignorance about why the women were targeted for humiliation, there is no doubt in his mind about the tensions between Harijans and Hindus in Sirasgaon. It is the dislocation of the stripping of the women, from other instances of the practice of untouchability (such as not using main roads, or having access to common sources of drinking water) which should be highlighted. Dighe notes "*Perhaps it [the motive] has come forward in a distorted manner.*" (my emphasis) The distortion, one could argue, lies in the judge (and juridical reason)

being unable to employ categories such as those of desire, sexual violence, and expressions of masculinity (or emasculation) historically, as part of a narrative that rounds off other more visible effects of untouchability.²⁷

Caste, gender, desire

The judge's inability to look to the context within which the Sirasgaon incident occurred is revealing. Not just because the judge seems to be unable to link caste and gender in providing a rationale for what took place in this instance, but because it erases the complex ways in which the regulation of desire through marriage, the maintenance of caste purity, and sexual violence against dalit women are connected in the logic of what happened. What follows is a brief attempt to provide that context, before going on with the discussion of the Sirasgaon case.

For the purposes of my argument, the regulation of marriage as a means of maintaining caste identity is important. The problem of inter-caste marriage becomes the critical means of politicizing caste *and* gender identities, then, since it invests marriage with an element of choice, marking the issue of desire as transgressing the norms laid down within castes regarding marriage. Ambedkar, for instance, notes that:

There are many Castes which allow inter-dining. But it is a common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of Caste and the consciousness of Caste. I am convinced that the real remedy is inter-marriage. Fusion of blood alone can create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount the separatist feeling—the feeling of beings aliens—created by Caste will not vanish. Among the Hindus inter-marriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well-knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. *The real remedy for breaking Caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste.* [emphasis in the original] (Moon, 1979: 67)

The problem of the circulation of women is tied explicitly to the

formation and persistence of caste, and it is this critical fact that “makes” caste. While Ambedkar does not make a direct connection between caste, desire, and patriarchy, his understanding of caste leads us to positing such a connection as foundational. The nature of caste-specific, gendered violence would seem to point to this logic as well.

Veena Das in writing about the judicial construction of male desire as reflected in case law and judgements on rape has said that “[the] social savage is tamed by the application of rules of alliance which provide the grid within which men may be constructed through their relatedness to each other.” (1996: 2418) Furthermore, the intersections of discourses of sexuality with those of alliance serve to legitimate certain enactments of desire and sexuality as natural and instinctive. But what of the case where modes of desiring are prohibited because of a systematic regulation of alliance such as caste endogamy? It is rules of caste alliance that serve as barriers to the possibility that all men might see all women as potentially “theirs”. Imaging the possibility of expressing desire for upper-caste women is fraught with the possibility of violent disciplining for dalit men. It cannot be enacted as anything other than the fantasy of rape, since no other relationship to upper-caste women can be permitted. At the same time, the bodies of dalit women are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony without the intervention of a discourse of desire and/or sexuality because of the overdetermination of this violence as caste privilege.²⁸

In the case of Chundur (Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh) a dalit boy (Govatota Ravi) brushed against a Reddy boy sitting in front of him, which led to an altercation. Ravi then fled the village in anticipation of retaliation, but when he returned, he was met by a gang of Reddys at the railway station who proceeded to beat him up, forced brandy down his throat, and took him to a police station claiming that he had harassed some upper-caste women in an inebriated state. Later, after a sustained boycott of dalits in Chundur, and attempts to evict them from the village, the dalits were hacked to death in a pre-planned attack with the collusion of the police machinery on August 6, 1991. Eight bodies were

fished out from the irrigation canals and drains of Chundur, nine men were missing, one dalit man died of shock after seeing the dead body of his younger brother, and a young dalit man who survived the attack and later gave witness was killed by the police, in the course of their disbanding a hunger strike organized by the dalits of Chundur demanding justice. (Balagopal, 1991).²⁹ As another report on Chundur noted, in the changed rural socio-political context indicated by the growing dalit militancy around a struggle for civil rights on the one hand, and an upper-caste anti-Mandal backlash on the other, questions of desire and sexual freedom were often coded as the extreme forms of upward mobility.

[T]he upper-caste men see the attempt of the dalit man to marry upward, or worse still, to have 'illicit' sexual relations with an upper-caste woman, as forms of caste aggression. . . . It is quite clear that dalit harassment of upper-caste women gains sympathy across the board while upper-caste aggression against dalit women, often extreme and unremitting, but naturalized by caste privilege, regularity and lack of protest, goes unnoticed. (Samata Sanghatana, 1991: 2082)

In the context of Tamil Nadu, Gabrielle Dietrich has noted that the struggles between dalit men and others are often displaced onto instances of violence against dalit women, which are then recuperated in a struggle between men to control the interpretation of the extent and nature of the originary violation. Hence in the case of Bodi, the call to dalit men to seek brides from the upper castes in the escalation of caste tensions created by the murder of a dalit woman, let loose a flood of repression that left thirty people dead, many injured, and caused serious damage to property in the village. Dietrich writes:

We also have to reflect on the fact that control over the women of a community is an integral part of establishing superiority—so much so that the Dalit community is forced into rape fantasies. At the same time, the expression of these rape fantasies is persecuted with much more vigour than the actual rapes and murders inflict[ed] on Dalits. The reason for this is obviously the fact that even the fantasy is perceived as posing a lethal threat to the perpetuation of the caste system, while the actually ongoing rapes and murders are perpetuating it. (1992: 77).

In these accounts the case is read as a comment on the socio-political relations (especially rural) of caste prevailing in post-Mandal India, where the context of a renewed awareness of caste identity and the struggle for reservations is an explanation underwriting the narration of these events.³⁰ The Sirasgaon incident, though removed from the post-Mandal politicization of caste identity on a national level, benefits from these later readings around the issues I have been tackling as they emerge through the case judgment itself. To that extent, this contemporary frame aids us, I would argue, in pushing questions of desire, violence, and dalitness a little further.

But what of the other questions raised by the case regarding the nature of untouchability, its eradication, and the ideals of social enshrined in the constitution?

III

The juridical discourse around this event is remarkably silent on its understanding of the case as "atrocities." Though the judgement seems to have been delivered by a progressive judge aware of the extent of violence and humiliation suffered by the women, the case was not registered under the 1955 Untouchability Offences Act as I mentioned earlier. Neither does the judge comment on the conditions of untouchability and the act of violence against the women in his judgement outside the narrative of moral outrage. What would it have meant to call Sirasgaon an "atrocities"?

The word "atrocities" ad. L. atrocitatem, n. of quality f. *atrox* fierce, cruel, means: 1. savage enormity, horrible or heinous wickedness; 2. Fierceness, sternness, implacability; 3. An atrocious deed, an act of extreme cruelty and heinousness, and finally, 4. *colloq.* with no moral reference: A very bad blunder, violation of taste or good manners, etc.³¹ In the above definitions, "atrocities" shuttles between being (a) an unnatural act, a crime against humanity, and (b) an offence to aesthetic sensibilities and good cultivation; a threat to civility. We nowhere find the connotation of it being used as a term to describe crimes against a particular class or group of people, which is why the *Fifth Report* had categorically noted that "atrocities" is not a legal term. (see note 13) In fact the term "atrocities" marks a distinction between the natural and the

unnatural; the cultured and the uncultured. Clearly these meanings of "atrocities" do not cover the value accrued to the term in the Indian situation, where it is used to describe acts of violence against untouchables (and women), and marks a deficiency in the political status of these citizen-subjects. That is to say, it is the excess of certain markers of identity (such as the untouchable or gendered body) which leads to the diminution of their political value as citizens equal before the law. In such a situation, the state needs to necessarily implement a series of special regulations to equalize their place in the domain of politics.³² This politics of exceptionality is evident in the attempts to formulate specific legislation to deal with rape and/or caste crimes. The use of the term "atrocities" to understand these issues perhaps harkens back to a notion of their fundamental barbarity and perversity, which places them outside the space of politics, society, and the law. At the same time, the efforts to control these events places them squarely within the domain of governance and control, where a language of compensation is asked to perform the work of equalizing subjects who appear to be the abject bearers of marks of difference.³³

Legislation only remembers its own language of verification. Case law and precedent play the role of juridical memory, in that they define the parameters of possible arguments, and the possibilities for establishing motive, intention, and "good" evidence. The selective use of the accused and victims' life-worlds then becomes read through the language of necessity: what is the bare minimum of external facts that may be drawn upon to make an event/incident into a case with its own rigours of analysis and interpretation. Clearly the moral judgement behind neutral decisions on evidence and punishment, such as the outrage expressed by the judge regarding the stripping of dalit women—which relied on an imagined feminine shame at exposure—was delinked from whether the stripping contributed to a change in the general condition of "harijans" in Sirasgaon. Juridical memory stopped at the point where the everyday lives of dalits and *savarnas* began. The relations of power that underwrote caste practices in the village were incapable of being incorporated into Dighe's account except as the existence of factions. Motives and intention were read off a hypothesis about conspiracy, i.e., that there seemed to be a larger

structure of revenge, betrayal, etc. which was visible though the stripping incident, yet incomprehensible to juridical reason. The problem of untouchability became part of another narrative about socio-political relations in the village where the social effects of untouchability (e.g. not being able to take water through the village, the efforts of villagers to maintain "status") were delinked from the political relations that underwrote them. Untouchability was a social evil, while politics was really about factions, the gram panchyat's internal politics, the ability to influence the police machinery, etc. Hence the matter of untouchability as bodily stigma regulated through an elaborate edifice of permitted marriages, orientations of desire, and the possession of dalit women, was wrenched apart from the overall deprivation of dalits in Sirasgaon.

In the judicial reading of Sirasgaon, there is no possible meaning as to the stripping of the women, and the exhibition of their naked bodies to Shevantibai, which emerges from the context of the incident itself. If the stripping was an insult (to Kishan, to all dalits?), how do we read the relations between Shevantibai as compromised female observer of other women's shame, and the dalit women? How to understand Vithal Amrita's position as observer and exhibited? Is there any possibility of desirous relationships between Yedu and Sonabai, or Kishan and Shevantibai, outside the orbit of upper-caste violation, and upward mobility, respectively?³⁴ How do instances of molestation, stripping, rape etc. figure as caste crimes when they paradoxically go against common-sensical understandings of untouchability (pollution of water sources, social boycott, prohibition of temple entry, etc.)?

In conclusion

I began by saying that the questions posed by dalit women about autonomous organizing, bodily experience, and caste consciousness (their difference from Brahmanical feminism, in brief) contain both a challenge to a feminist understanding of the Indian woman as she has emerged historically, *and* the danger of anthropologising itself. The latter becomes clear in the various ways in which dalit women are positioned at the edges of "our" understanding regarding their experiences of rape, collective violence, the family and

dalit patriarchy, etc. I have tried to read *around* a case which would constitute for some, such an expression of [dalit women's] liminality. I have attempted to talk about Sirasgaon by providing some trajectory of the problem that such an event raises for understanding the ways in which narratives of desire, power, and politics interrupt that of juridical reason, and prevent it from arriving at an explanation of "what really happened". To explore the possibilities of interrupting the tracks of juridical reason, and pushing it to its limits through a broad commitment to the possibilities of feminist critique, alliance, and partial identification, has been one of the aims of this essay.

I am aware that this exercise has raised more questions than it has answered, but I hope it has at least raised the possibility of reading through an incident of "atrocitiy" as a legal case involving judgements and punishments, rather than the more familiar mode in which such narratives make their appearance: the fact-finding report. This allows us to at least talk about the embedding of certain aspects of the world in the domain of juridical reason, and asks most importantly about the politics behind the fixed identities of dalits and others that appear in the arguments. If I am unable to link the issue of caste and gender definitively in this discussion, it is because the sources themselves maintain those connections in a fleeting, evocative fashion.

Much contemporary work seems to be animated by a sense of political urgency and its own interventionary powers, which often seem incommensurate with the limited material relied upon in making the theoretical and empirical arguments that undergird the works themselves. Perhaps this piece partakes of such a sensibility, though I hope the arguments made in this brief essay have managed to partly convey the thickness and many-voicedness of the "archive", as it were. The issues of care, respect and ethics are perhaps best displayed in pushing towards the edges of feminist and Brahmanical life-worlds, such that we come to experience a radical falling away of dearly-held conceits.

Notes

No doubt discourses of difference have been crucial in dismantling the hegemonic claims of a rather unselfconscious feminism which claims to

speak in the interests of a monolithic Woman. Fracturing claims of unity and sisterhood has in fact served to expose the contradictions and tensions between women, given their differential histories, and the positions of privilege they occupy in relation to each other. It is important to mention here Judith Butler's critique of what she called an unspoken biologism at the heart of discussions of sexual difference. Butler argued that in the effort to distinguish sex from gender, there was a tendency to plot gender and the effects of different processes of gendering onto already-sexed bodies. Instead, Butler argued that gender itself produced a 'natural sex' which was seen to be prior to culture. (Butler 1990). In doing so, Butler put forth an argument about the performativity of gender; i.e., that gender differences assumed their (in) stability because they were performed. Butler has recently retracted from a complete espousal of performativity, after there was much criticism of her perceived position as one supporting a free-floating choice of gender identity. She has moved towards a discussion of the materiality framework. (Butler 1993).

- ² This is somewhat like the gap between *doxa* and *orthodoxy* that Pierre Bourdieu has discussed. Social science maintains the conceit that it is describing external reality, though it has brought this reality into existence through its efforts to understand and categorize a *socius* which has been created by social scientists convinced of their theoretical and methodological tools of analysis. Meanwhile, the *doxic* modality is that of a logic of practice, driven by the immanent rules of a game which is only articulated in the doing of it. It seems possible to draw on Bourdieu's discussion of the *habitus* to talk about "caste" itself. That is, as an acquired disposition; an orientation; a structure of generative capacities through which agents exercise a practical mastery over their situation. This would allow us to understand caste through its varied practices, rather than as a pre-existing division in society. (Bourdieu, 1990)
- ³ Typically the moment that marks a shift in the sensibilities of upper-caste progressives is the Mandal agitation, though we also need to take into account the extreme dislocations and shifts in the economic sphere that are becoming visible through the Government of India's policies of liberalisation. The shift towards a muted Brahmanism that inheres in the "new" cultures of consumption of the upper classes/castes is elegantly discussed in Tharu, 1996. Important also is a discussion organised by the Nana Patil Academy, on the topic of "The New Economic Policy and its Impact on Productive Relations, Caste, and the Woman's Question." [loose translation from Marathi] The discussion was held in Pune on March 24, 1996, and Bharat Patankar was the main speaker.

In a critique of "casteism from the left" Sharad Patil (1995) has pointed to the regressive caste politics of Laloo Prasad Yadav's Janata Party in Bihar, Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party, and Prakash Ambedkar's Bharatiya Republican Party. Important also is Gopal Guru's (1994) criticism of some elements of the Bahujan Samaj Party's politics around dalitness.

- ⁴ I am alluding to some questions which were raised in a discussion of Gopal Guru's paper "Dalit Women Talk Differently" presented at a meeting organised by the Ambedkar Prabodhini on February 25, 1996 in Pune, where he asks whether we don't run the risk of reifying caste by speaking of dalit women, and why dalitness should be a marker of women's difference.
- ⁵ I am interested in pursuing one aspect of the problem of dalit women and dalit feminism. This concerns the ways in which we might talk about the emergence of an anthropological discourse on the topic. (I use this term as shorthand, though I don't have the space to go into an argument justifying why I call it that.) I think there are problems with evoking the typical sensibilities of estrangement, remoteness, and surprise that such a discourse normally permits. There is a larger structure and logic to the Brahmanical discourse on women, where dalit women and untouchability play a quite significant role. I am pointing to these relationships when I talk about relating ourselves to this history. I should clarify that I am making this limited point in this piece. Here, in using the term Brahmanical feminism, I am not attempting to homogenise upper-caste feminism and all its strategies.
- ⁶ The same might be said of the ways in which Ambedkar, for instance, seemingly appropriates a discourse of modernity as well as a belief in parliamentary democracy in furthering his radical agenda of the annihilation of caste. For more on Ambedkar's significant demand for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes (as untouchables, or Scheduled Castes, were classified by the colonial government) see Gokhale (1993), Gore (1993), and Zelliot (1969).
- ⁷ The Government of India passed the Untouchability (Offenses) Act in 1955, which was amended in 1976, and renamed as the Protection of Civil Rights Act (Act 22 of 1955). Most recently, the Government of India passed The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 which is much more stringent than the earlier act.
- ⁸ In *Devarajiah vs. Padmanna*, AIR 1958 Mysore 84, the court ruled that: "It is to be noticed that the word 'untouchability' occurs only in Art. 17 and is enclosed in inverted commas. This clearly indicates that the subject-matter of that Article is not untouchability in its literal or grammatical sense but the practice as it has developed historically in this country." (para. 4) Later on, the court held that: "*Art. 17 which was intended to give effect to the decision to abolish the practice of untouchability, as mentioned above, does not define that term. Nor is a definition contained anywhere else in the Constitution. This omission would appear to be deliberate as the intention presumably was to leave no room or scope for the continuance of the practice in any shape or form.*" (para. 4, my emphasis) In dismissing this case, the court held that the temporary practice of social boycott (against the Jain petitioner, in this case) did not constitute a practice of untouch-

ability, which was based on disabilities arising from birth. Contrarily, in *Hadibandhu Behera vs. Banamali Sahu*, AIR 1961 Orissa 33, the court had held that a person excommunicated from a high caste also counted as an "untouchable".

- ⁹ An important case which challenged Article 17 through recourse to Article 26 is *Chinamma vs. D.P.I.*, AIR 1964 Andhra Pradesh 277. For judgements upholding that Article 26 permits for ex-communication, and that it is a right that cannot be taken away by arguing that it poses a threat to the civil rights of members, see: *Venkataramana Devaru vs. State of Mysore*, All India Reporter (hereafter AIR) 1958 S.C. 255; *Sarup Singh vs. State of Punjab*, AIR 1959 S.C. 860, and *Saifuddin vs. State of Bombay*, AIR 1962, S.C. 853 (869, 873, 875).
- ¹⁰ *Marathwada* was critical in drawing the attention of the Maharashtra government from the mid-60s to the problems of underdevelopment faced by this region, which had been a part of Hyderabad state until 1956. At the same time, *Marathwada* made attempts to develop and give expression to a distinct Marathwada *asmita* or identity, which rested in large part on the history of the fight against the feudal practices of the Nizam. Most importantly, by the mid-1970s, when the issue of *namaantar* (the renaming of Marathwada University after Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar) began to split the region into pro and anti *namaantarwadis*, [those in favour of the renaming] *Marathwada* was firmly against the renaming agitation, and played a significant role in betraying its progressive credentials, especially with the dalits of the region. *Marathwada's* editorials against the renaming agitation, and its silence on the religion of terror let loose in the rural areas of the region in 1978 is legion, and was repeatedly mentioned in my interviews with dalit activists in Marathwada during my visits to that region between April and August 1996.
- ¹¹ The case details are as follows. *Yadu and Others vs. The State of Maharashtra* was filed in Gangapur Taluka as case number 768/64. It was subsequently shifted to the Aurangabad Taluka court as both parties had alleged undue pressure and interference in the case. The Taluka court passed its decision on December 28, 1964 under the supervision of the Judicial Magistrate, First Class, [hereafter, the magistrate] P.E. Vani. The case went on appeal to the Aurangabad District and Sessions court as Criminal Appeal Number 5/1965. The appeal was filed on 16/1/1965, and the sessions court passed its judgment on 30/6/1965 under the supervision of C.J. Dighe. The case then went to the Bombay High Court as Criminal Revision Application Number 622/1965, and Justice V.M. Tarkunde passed his decision on 29 March, 1966. The Sessions court and the Bombay High Court upheld the judgment passed by the magistrate with slight modification. (The Sessions court argued that there wasn't enough evidence to convict the accused under Section 325 of the Indian Penal Code which concerns the causing of grievous hurt, but upheld the rest of the magistrate's judgment.) The Sirasgaon case was discussed in the

Maharashtra Legislative Assembly [MLA] and the Maharashtra Legislative Council [MLA]. *MLA Debates*, Vol XII, Part II, 11 March-3 April, 1964: 693-703. [discussion under a cut motion]. *MLC Debates*, Vol. 12, no. 3, 14 February-3 April, 1964. The Republican Party of India held many rallies across Maharashtra to protest against the event, and songs were composed on Sirasgaon.

- 12 As late as 1978, in *Mangala Parashram Kelkar and another vs. State of Maharashtra*, AIR 1979 Bombay 282, the court ruled that Buddhists did not belong to the Scheduled Castes, and did not fall within the purview of the Protection of Civil Rights Act. [Mahars, and a few members of other untouchable castes in Maharashtra mass-converted to Buddhism on December 6, 1956 following Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's example.] The judge referred to the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950, and its most recent amendment of 1976, where it was mentioned that: "Notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu or the Sikh religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste." (para. 3) This through Explanation II to Article 25 in the Constitution had made clear that reference to Hindu should be broadly construed to include Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists.
- 13 A *vada* refers to a large house or mansion. It is used here to indicate a section of the village, a space set off by the inhabitation of certain castes as in *Mahar vada*, *Chambhar vada*, etc.
- 14 Jagannath Chambhar was the eleventh accused, who was acquitted by the magistrate.
- 15 The first *panchnama* was "abnormal." There was no mention of the injuries of the dalits noted, and the *panchnama* recorded the statements of all four women together as one statement. Also the *panchanama* repeatedly (three times) mentioned that "besides this nothing else happened" in its description of the run of events. The statements taken by the PSI on 22-12-63 suggested that accused 1 and 3 had come to Kishan's home to talk to him about the money owed them, and his absence from work, and that they then started beating those in the vicinity with sticks. The issue of parading the women naked was nowhere mentioned. It should be noted that it was up to the police to register the incident under the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955. For an analysis of the Act's effectivity, see Iyer and Misra, 1976.
- 16 This version of events appears in the sessions court judgment, and was supported by Vithal, Trimbak, Natha Baba and Sakharam Khajekar, according to Judge Dighe. Justice Tarkhunde noted in his oral judgment at the High Court that the lawyer for the accused, Ramrao Adik, had noted that there had been a mistake in the sessions judge's statement. Vithal and Trimbak did not make a statement regarding what had happened the next morning, but had deposed that the night before, Sahebrao had contacted them as they were on their way to Gangapur, and persuaded

- them to return. Justice Tarkhunde noted that this was a minor point unworthy of questioning the depositions *per se*.
- 17 The Medical Officer Dr Mungikar had examined the injured, and given injury certificates which showed that Sonabai had one abrasion on the neck and seven contusions on the elbow, back, knee, leg, and both buttocks; Kadubai had two contusions on the two buttocks in addition to a fracture to a left radius bone; Sakrabai had three contusions, one on the knee, on the back, and the right buttock; Laxmibai had five contusions on both the buttocks, both the thighs, and right knee, and Vithal had five contusions, one on the shoulder, two on both thighs, one on the wrist, and one in the thumb. Dr. Mungikar had ruled that all injuries were caused with a blunt weapon. He had treated the injured for more than a month. Later Judge Dighe noted that since Mungikar had attempted to set Kadubai's fracture himself, without referring her to a specialist, hence without an X-ray to corroborate her fracture, Kadubai had lost out on important medical evidence of the extent of harm caused her by the accused.
 - 18 Section 147 concerns the charge of rioting: "a riot being simply an unlawful assembly in a particular state of activity, that activity being accompanied by the use of force or violence." Section 323 concerns the voluntary causing of hurt. Section 354 concerns the assault or use of criminal force to outrage the modesty of a woman. (Assaults committed with the intention to rape are not covered by this section). Finally, Section 448 covers the instance of house-trespass. In passing his judgement, the magistrate had covered other instances which seems to have been left out of the FIR [First Information Report]. See footnote 22 for the magistrate's list of offences.
 - 19 This *panchnama* was drawn up once the status of Sirasgaon changed from a non-cognizable to a cognizable offence. Aiyar's *Judicial Dictionary* notes that the former "is a case in which a police officer, within or without a Presidency town, may not arrest without a warrant." (709) In the case of the latter, "once a magistrate takes cognisance of the facts upon the report of the offense, it is open to him to proceed against any person, named or unnamed, in regard to whom he considers the facts make out a *prime facie* case." (231) An offence is taken cognisance of, not the accused.
 - 20 Interestingly, in demolishing this argument, the judge noted that dalit women had been carrying water through that road for the past two years. A comment on the kinds of prohibitions existing in the village until then.
 - 21 In his judgment, Judge Dighe noted that according to a statement from Constable Salunkhe, who had accompanied the cart to Gangapur, PSI Patil was in the *gram panchayat* office during the night and the *sarpanch*, *upasarpanch*, and other villagers met him there. The judge suggested that the *sarpanch* and *upasarpanch*, therefore, far from displaying any evil animus against the accused seem to have sided with them . . . because the accused belong to the same community as the *sarpanch* and the *upasarpanch* (i.e., Maratha).

- ²² Sections 147 (read with 146), 448, 323, 325, 354, 294, 149 of the Indian Penal Code, respectively. The punishment for the offences was decided by the magistrate as: six months imprisonment under S. 147, four months for S. 448, six months for S. 323, one year and a fine of Rs. 200 for S. 325, one year and fine of Rs. 100 for S. 354, and three months for S. 294. Vithal Amrita was to get Rs. 1,000 in damages. (Notes: S. 149 establishes that each member of an unlawful assembly who commits an offence with a common object is guilty of that offence, and does not carry separate punishment. Judge Dighe did not find enough evidence to prosecute the accused under S. 325).
- ²³ "Harijan" is Gandhi's term for the untouchables, which means, "people of God." It indexes Gandhi's attempts to incorporate untouchables into the Hindu fold through a moral re-education of the upper-castes. Ambedkar's use of the term Depressed Classes was political, to denote their civic deprivation. Ambedkar highlighted untouchability as a form of political inequality, a problem for Indian democracy springing from its inability to shrug off the religious sanction for the caste system.
- ²⁴ In his *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek writes:
- ... a thing is wholly "outside itself", in its external conditions; every positive feature is already present in the circumstances which are not yet this thing. The supplementary operation which produces from this bundle a unique, self-identical thing is the purely symbolic, tautological gesture of positing these external conditions as the conditions-components of the thing and, simultaneously, of presupposing the existence of a ground which holds together this multitude of conditions. (1993: 148)
- Žižek suggests that it is in the act of naming itself that the possible uniqueness of the thing arises. This is a gesture of radical nominalism where the very outside of the thing constitutes what it "is", while allowing for the fiction that the thing itself might be different; that its conditions of emergence are somehow to be linked with the ground from which it arises, while at the same time allowing for its difference from that ground. The problem is not about the construction of categories. Naming is about *things*, and not categories, or even concept-metaphors, that would guide us in further processes of comprehension, as Kant for instance suggests, especially in the exegesis on space-time categories which mould perception. The problem is that if the ground itself is implicated in the emergence of the thing, there can be no adequate mode of explanation about the thing as having an explanation or rationale of/for being in and of itself; the thing is but a coalescence of what is outside it, the ground. The naming of the thing is performative, but guided by what was already there in the content/ground which could be bundled up around a particular signifier. If we see naming-as-explanation, then Žižek effectively tells us that words cannot explain a reality that they are themselves stitched together from: explanation cannot but be circular, telling us what we always-already knew.

- ²⁵ *Marathwada* noted that “*Sirasgavat ghadu naye te, ghadala. Sarvanchi man sharamene khali zhukavi . . .*” [In Sirasgaon, something that should have never happened occurred. Everyone should hang their head in shame. . .] Later in the same article, it noted that the villagers were now full of remorse about what had occurred, and went on to emphasise the fact even though such a humiliating incident had occurred, dalit leaders (i.e., members of the Republican Party in India) had kept their cool, and not allowed the things to get out of control. *Marathwada* implied that if justice was not done, the fallout of Sirasgaon would be severe. In the description of events, the accused were referred to as *goondas* though it is clear that they were powerful members of the village, with key positions in local political institutions. Sunday, 5th January, 1964. (front page)
- ²⁶ Most of the judgement concerns the inappropriate and compromised behaviour of PSI Patil, and an examination of the various statements and depositions that go to show that Patil acted in bad faith, and tried to cover up the seriousness of the incident by not following the correct procedure in dealing with the case. In doing so, the judge also mentioned the contradictions in the statements of the witnesses and noted that in the case of a police official having tampered with the statement of witnesses, it becomes necessary to corroborate the recorded statements with other evidence and the circumstances of the case. The judge drew attention to *Dalip Singh vs. State of Punjab*, AIR 1953, Supreme Court 364 in arguing that the defence’s pleas of disbelieving the victims as well as other witnesses such as Vithal Amrita’s other sons, since they were related to each other, baseless. In the above mentioned case the judge had ruled that: “Ordinarily a close relative of the victim would be the last person to screen the real culprit and falsely involve an innocent person, and the mere fact of relationship, far from being a ground for suspicion is often a guarantee of the truth. There is no rule of prudence that a relative’s evidence requires corroboration, and the fallacy that there is any such rule needs to be clearly dispelled.”
- ²⁷ It is important that S also remembers an incident of filling water as having led to the ensuing violence in Sirasgaon, picking up on some of the statements of the accused.
- ²⁸ Most recently, this was evident in the judgement on the rape of Bhanwari Devi, a *sathin* (grass-roots social worker in the Rajasthan Government’s Women’s Development Programme) from the village Bhateri who had agitated against the practice of child-marriage in her district. Bhanwari Devi (who is from the Kumher caste classified as an Other Backward Caste) was gang-raped on September 22, 1992 in retaliation for her activities, and then faced a hostile police machinery that refused to register the case, and a male doctor at the primary health centre who refused to conduct a medical examination. The medical examination was finally conducted after 52 hours, leading effectively to the destruction of evidence of rape. The trial at the sessions court began only in October, 1994, and the

judgement which was passed chose to disregard the evidence of Bhanwari Devi and her husband Mohan (who had witnessed the rape), and to give undue weight to the medical evidence. In passing his judgement, the judge commented that:

"The court is of the opinion that Indian culture has not fallen to such low depths; that someone who is brought up in it, an innocent, a rustic man, will turn into a man of evil conduct who disregards caste and age differences and becomes animal enough to assault a woman". (Rajagopal and Dutta, 1996: 28) The judgement conceals an assumption about rules of alliance and sexuality, where the judge blatantly disregards the rape of Bhanwari Devi by the powerful Gujjars of the village by arguing that these men would be uninterested in raping a lower-caste woman. The discourse of caste morality and virtue masks the reality of the transgression of caste rules regulating desire and sexuality in this instance of rape, and seeks to erase it through recourse to common-sense: men know that women outside their caste are inaccessible to them. The relations of power that regulate the caste-bound exchange of women are violated precisely because lower-caste women are not seen to be like "our" women (possessing a sense of shame at the violation, perhaps), in the logic of this discourse. It is the cross-cutting of the discourse of sexuality and alliance with the discourse of caste taboo that leads to the extraordinary space accorded to Bhanwari Devi in the judgement. The judge asks: what perversity propels Bhanwari to imagine being raped by Gujjars, when they would not even consider her worthy of such defilement?

- ²⁹ Kannabiran's report (1991) mentions that twenty-one dalits were massacred, while in Balagopal's report the total dead would come to nineteen.
- ³⁰ See M.N. Srinivas (1990) and André Béteille (1990) on the problematic politicisation of caste, and solidifying of casteism. This is representative of the intellectual anti-Mandal response. An interesting reading of Brahman woe regarding the waning of "merit" is Ramaswamy R. Iyer (1991). Gail Omvedt (1990) makes a strong argument for the logic of reservation, and argues for universal reservation according to the principle of proportional representation.
- ³¹ *Oxford English Dictionary being a corrected Re-issue with Introduction, Supplement and Bibliography of A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Ed. James A.H. Murray, Henry Bradley, W.H. Craigne, and C.T. Onions. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933.
- ³² Interestingly, the Protection of Civil Rights Act mentions that: "In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires,—
(a) 'civil rights' means any right accruing to a person by reason of the abolition of 'untouchability' by article 17 of the Constitution" (my emphasis; quoted in Karmarkar, 1978:13). This indexes the making of the untouchable citizen-subject—a person with civil rights—by bringing her/him within the pale of society. Not until untouchability is abolished does the untouchable have rights, and again, to make these rights "real", the state

needs necessarily to implement a series of protective measures to equalise her/him alongside others.

- 33 These arguments are much indebted to Balibar's work (1994a, 1994b) on the citizen-subject, and Marc Galanter's important work (1984) on caste, law, and "compensatory discrimination".
- 34 A corollary would be: Are issues of desire and desirability decided once and for all through inter-caste marriage, as Ambedkar seems to suggest. That is to say, is it illegitimacy of the transaction (rape, molestation, harassment), or the nature of the desire itself, which is the problem?

References

- Awasthi, S.K. (1994), *The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989*, Allahabad: Premier Publishing Company.
- Balagopal, K. (1991), "Chundur and Other Chundurs", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 19.
- Balibar, Etienne (1994a), "Subjection and Subjectivation," in Copjec, Joan (ed.), *Supposing the Subject*, London: Verso.
- (1994b), *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, New York: Routledge.
- Baxi, Upendra (1992), "Emancipation as Justice: Babsaheb Ambedkar's Legacy and Vision," in *Ambedkar and Social Justice*, Dir. Publications Division, New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
- Béteille, André (1990), "Caste and Politics", *Times of India*, September 11, 1990.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1990), *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge.
- (1993), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York: Routledge.
- Chakravarti, Uma (1993), "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India. Gender, Caste, Class and State", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 3.
- (n.d.), "Reconceptualising Gender: Phule, Brahmanism and Brahminical Patriarchy", Unpublished Ms.
- Das, Veena (1996), "Sexual Violence, Discursive Formations and the State", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXI, Nos. 35, 36, and 37, Special Number.
- Dietrich, Gabriele (1992), "Dalit Movements and Women's Movements," in *Reflections on the Women's Movement: Religion, Ecology, Development*, New Delhi: Horizon India.
- Galanter, Marc (1972), "The Abolition of Disabilities: Untouchability and the Law", in Mahar, Michael J. (ed.), *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- (1984), *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Castes in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Gokhale, Jayashree (1993), *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Gore, M.S. (1993), *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, New Delhi: Sage.
- Gupta, S.K. (1994), "Violence Against the Scheduled Castes: Parameters and Trends", *The Downtrodden India: Journal of Dalit and Bahujan Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (May–August).
- Guru, Gopal (1991), "Dalit Killings in Marathwada", *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 21.
- (1994), *Kanshi Ram Yanca Bahujanvad*, Pune: Samajvignan Academy.
- (1995), "Dalit Women Talk Differently", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 14–21.
- Ilaiah, Kancha (1994), "The Chundur Carnage: The Struggle of Dalits", in Pendse, Sandeep (ed.), *At Cross-Roads: Dalit Movement Today*, Bombay: Vikas Adhyayan Kendra.
- (1995), "Of Land and Dalit Women", *Frontier*, September 2, 4–9.
- (1996), *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Calcutta: Samya.
- Iyer, Ramaswamy, R. (1991), "Towards Clarity on Reservations Question", *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 2–9.
- Iyer, T.G.L. and Suresh Misra (1976), *Enforcement of Untouchability (Offences) Act 1955—A Survey*, New Delhi: Bureau of Police Research and Development.
- Jogdand, P.G. (ed.) (1995), *Dalit Woman: Issues and Perspectives*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
- Kannabiran, V. and K. Kannabiran (1991), "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence", *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 14.
- Karmarkar, R.G. (1978), *The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 [Act 22 of 1955]*, Pune: N.R. Bhalerao Law Book-Sellers and Publishers.
- Khare, R.S. (1995), "The Body, Sensoria, and Self of the Powerless: Remembering/Re-membering Indian Untouchable Women", *New Literary History*, Vol. 26, 147–68.
- Kosambi, Meera (1996), *Women's Oppression in the Public Gaze*, Publication of the Research Centre for Women's Studies, Bombay: S.N.D.T. University.
- Moon, Vasant (ed.), (1979), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. I, Education Department, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra.
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind (1992), "Issues of Widowhood: Gender and Resistance in Colonial Western India", in Haynes, Doughts and Gyan Prakash (eds.), *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Omvedt, Gail (1990), "Twice-Born' Riot Against Democracy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 29.
- Pardeshi, Pratima (1996), "Dr. Ambedkar ani Strimukti", Pune: Publication of the Krantisingh Nana Patil Academy.

- Patil, Sharad (1995), "Democracy: Brahmanical and Non-Brahmanical", *Frontier*, September 30–October 21, 42–46.
- Rajgopal, Aparna and Nilima Dutta (1996), "Bhanwri Devi Betrayed by the Judicial System", *The Lawyers*, Vol. II, No. 1, January, 1996.
- Ratanlal and Dhirajilal's *Law of Crimes* (1987, 23rd edition in two volumes), New Delhi: Bharat Law House.
- Sangari, Kumkum (1995), "Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies", *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 23 and 30.
- Sitaram, Sudha (1994), "Burdens of Interpretation: The Caste of Kanappa", *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 11.
- Srinivas, M.N. (1991), "End of the Egalitarian Dream", *Sunday Observer*, August 12.
- Tharu, Susie (1991), "Upper Caste Violence: Study of Chunduru Carnage" (Samata Sanghatana report), *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 7.
- (1996), "The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body", *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 1.
- Zelliot, Eleanor (1969), *Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement*, doctoral dissertation, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Zizek, Slavoj (1993), *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham: Duke University.

From Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (ed) *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*, 1998, New Delhi: Kali for Women, pp. 204–47.

The Downtrodden among the Downtrodden

An Interview with a Dalit Agricultural Labourer

GAIL OMVEDT

In this interview, G.O. is Gail Omvedt; Kaminibai, a village woman, an "Untouchable"; and Ashok, a student from a labourer family.

G.O.: What time do you get up?

KAMINIBAI: 5 a.m.

G.O.: What do you do then?

KAMINIBAI: Housework. . . . [General laughter.]

G.O.: What is housework?

KAMINIBAI: Cooking, fetching water, collecting cowpies and cleaning the floor, preparing baths, washing clothes. . .

G.O.: When do you go to the fields?

KAMINIBAI: 10 a.m.

[Others speak, some say 8 a.m., some 10 a.m.]

G.O.: When do you return?

KAMINIBAI: 6 p.m.

G.O.: What do you do then?

KAMINIBAI: Housework!

G.O.: When do you go to sleep?

KAMINIBAI: About 9 or 10. . .

G.O.: Let's see . . . that's sixteen hours of work a day. And what is your pay?

KAMINIBAI AND OTHERS: [Some say one and a fourth rupees, some say one and a half, some say they sometimes work for less.]

G.O.: One and a half rupees for sixteen hours of work. What pay do the men get?

KAMINIBAI: Two and a half for light work, three for heavier work.

G.O.: What is the difference?

ASHOK: What is the difference in work?

KAMINIBAI: Running the plow, cutting ears of corn, collecting the crop, carrying it away, cutting ears of jawar, collecting leftovers for cattle [that is men's work].

G.O.: And women's work?

KAMINIBAI: Winnowing grain from chaff, weeding, picking cotton and taking out seeds, sowing after the rain is over. . .

G.O.: And what do you eat? [There is a discussion of lack of available work; they can't eat, all are like beggars, and prices rise with no change in pay.]

KAMINIBAI: Bhakri, Jawari bhakri, sometimes lal bhakri (coarse bread made from millet, sometimes from milo).

G.O.: And vegetables?

KAMINIBAI: Vegetables . . . what shall we tell you? If we have vegetables we can have spices but no salt, or salt but no spices, such is our poverty! There is no work. Some collect twigs, some collect wood and sell it, use it for fuel. What can we do—we are poor.

G.O.: Are these days worse than those of ten years ago?

ALL: Worse, worse, worse.

G.O.: You work sixteen hours a day, do men work sixteen hours a day?

KAMINIBAI: No. Women have to do different work . . . and men, with a *leave* (English word) from 4 a.m. to 9 a.m., have to go to the fields and work and come back at 6 p.m.

G.O.: And if men don't get work, what do they do?

KAMINIBAI: Nothing. Only agriculture.

G.O.: Do you want more work? Do you have work the whole year?

KAMINIBAI: No, sometimes we get it, sometimes we don't, sometimes it's available for two days, three days, for the rest of the time we are like this.

G.O.: Do you want more work?

KAMINIBAI: Yes, we want more work, but there is no work.

G.O.: This year is international women's year. Do you know anything about that?

ASHOK: They don't understand anything of that. [Explains.]

KAMINIBAI: We know nothing at all, *bai*. We can't read, can't write, can't do anything. If you say to sit someplace we sit there, if someone says sleep someplace we sleep there, such is our work. We are *jungli* people. . . [people of the wilderness].

G.O.: There should be demands for *jungli* women too. . .

KAMINIBAI: Yes, there should be demands. You make an effort. You.

[Ashok and I say that one person can do nothing, there must be a united effort. Ashok mentions the need for a "union."]

KAMINIBAI: Unity? How can we have unity? There is no united opinion among us. If I don't go to work someone else will go, and I will lose. We have no unity. The farmers have unity. . .

[Discussion of unity follows.]

G.O.: And is liquor a problem?

WOMEN: No, no.

ASHOK: Women don't drink.

G.O.: No, but the men?

KAMINIBAI: Oh well, yes, they are men.

G.O.: Another question, about divorce. If your husband goes, can you take another husband?

KAMINIBAI: Yes, yes, yes. We can take another. Two, two, three, three, no matter. We can take out a license or not!

G.O.: It seems that in your agricultural labourer community there is more equality between men and women compared to the higher communities. . .

KAMINIBAI: Yes.

G.O.: Still, is there male supremacy?

ASHOK: Yes, there is male supremacy. Still, during the famine relief work days they got equal pay. But in the work they do in the fields, men get more daily wages, they [women] get lower, and the reason for this is that men's work is heavier, more toilsome. Women's work is different. . .

G.O.: . . . but women. . .

KAMINIBAI: . . . have to do *double* [English word] work! We have to do the housework, and when the housework is finished we have

to do field work, and when the field work is finished we have to take care of the children, we have to do all the work. Suppose someone is thinking like this, some reader-and-writer, let him sit down and write an account: what sort of work has to be done, what sort of work the men do. I am ready to tell you. What do men do? They get up, they take a bath, they eat some bread and go to the fields. But understand what their duty is: they only do the work that is allotted to them in the fields. They only do one sort of work.

G.O.: It's the same in America also. Women work in factories and offices, but they get less pay than men. And when they finish in the factories and offices they have to do housework—and housework is without pay.

KAMINIBAI: Oho. That is the case here too. We remain without pay. If it would have been paid work we would have gotten *double* pay. If housework were paid it would go to the women. Are you men listening? Then say it: if there is competition about housework we would completely defeat them!

G.O.: What about dowry? Is there dowry among you?

KAMINIBAI: Dowry, yes, gold chains, horses, cycles, money, wristwatches. . . .

G.O.: You know in the Indian constitution—which was written by Babasaheb Ambedkar—dowry is illegal. Untouchability is illegal, dowry is illegal, there are rights, but in reality. . .

KAMINIBAI: There are no rights. Yes, correct.

ASHOK: It's written in the constitution.

KAMINIBAI: It's written, but it's not like that.

ASHOK: When you go to work do these other people—Kunbis, Marathas—practice casteism against you?

KAMINIBAI: They do, but we don't have to bother about that. We have our own pots and drink from them, we don't bother. We are not going to drink water from their hands. Now they don't do it very much.

G.O. AND ASHOK: In this country there's a woman prime minister. So in other countries people feel that women in India must have some rights, that you have made progress.

KAMINIBAI: Not at all, not at all, not even one anna in a rupee [i.e., not even one-sixteenth]. She's doing politics, and it's all

right, it's not for us, our life has not changed.

[Someone raises a question about why this American woman has come.]

KAMINIBAI: Now she has come, so she'll do something for us, perhaps for one anna in a rupee, forget the other fifteen.

ASHOK: She's going to study the conditions here; and at that time whatever obstacles there are to your building an organization, how to overcome them, in what way to build it, she'll write something. . .

KAMINIBAI: Yes, but will she write to us? She'll write something worth reading and writing, but it will be in thin small letters and we won't be able to read it, not at all, there will be no profit or loss to us. [General laughter.] Is this true or false? *Bai*, is what I am saying a mistake? Understand, we show our difficulties to you, you send from there some paper and some educated person will read, some children, and we know nothing, whatever they tell us or explain to us, we will understand. If we even have the time.

G.O.: Well, it's been a good discussion.

KAMINIBAI: O yes, *bai*, our India has reached a good state, it's ahead of all.

ASHOK: You're being sarcastic.

KAMINIBAI: You can take it that way, I'm talking out of anger. But it's not false, they've done nothing for us, there's no happiness for us.

ASHOK: In the time of the English, was that *raj* better than this one or not?

ALL: Yes, yes, yes.

KAMINIBAI: We were small, then, *bai*, but we were getting everything, grain, food, everything. Money was less but our stomachs were full. Tell me if there is no grain, if there is nothing for our stomachs, what have we to do with the state? Nothing at all. We condemn it. Because we are miserable we say the state is miserable. Isn't our life miserable? Then, whatever it does it does for them, it does nothing for the poor. Then tell us . . . we are expressing our sorrows to you, but up to this day no one has come to ask us about our sorrows.

ASHOK: But in the time of the English wasn't there casteism?

KAMINIBAI: Now it's better, about four annas in a rupee.

[Ashok mentions foreign ownership of factories, asking whether there is really true independence.]

KAMINIBAI: What can we understand of that, *bai*? We don't know how to read and write, we have no information at all about the country, who runs the factories, we have no information. Only that we don't get anything, that our wages are less, that our food and clothes are insufficient, that everything we get is short, only that we know and try to discuss. If I had been educated, I would have been a leader. But as it is I am only a bull for a festival [i.e., to be ceremoniously honoured for one day of the year and worked the rest].

[More discussion on casteism follows.]

G.O.: What do you think, with Kunbi, Teli, and other agricultural labourers, is unity possible?

KAMINIBAI: No. We need unity, but it won't be. If we Buddhists don't go to work, others will go and we will fall. What can we do? If the leaders go ahead, of course we'll follow them, but if they stay behind, they sit in their big houses, so where can we go? And if there's some money, the big people eat it up. They eat up votes. So they take money, we give votes, but we remain starving all the time.

G.O.: New leaders are needed. . .

KAMINIBAI: Yes, leaders of pure metal. . .

ASHOK: Like Ambedkar?

KAMINIBAI: Yes, he's great, there's none like that now. Now they want dhotis costing 50 rupees and their wives want saris, and we have to endure rags.

G.O.: Is there anything more you want to say?

KAMINIBAI: No, whatever you have asked we have answered, and to whatever extent you ask we will answer, we have endless sorrows.

* * *

The speaker in this interview is a Dalit (downtrodden or Untouchable) woman agricultural labourer in western India. Her remarks were part of a session recorded during a visit to a village of about

4,000 people in eastern Maharashtra. Although the striking eloquence of this woman in her forties makes the interview somewhat unusual, in group after group with which I met during the year and a half that I spent engaging lower-class and lower-caste women in discussions and meetings it was not unusual to find one or more such outspoken and bold local women leaders. Most of these discussions took place in a somewhat unconventional context: I went into villages and work situations accompanied by rebellious or radical village youths (in this instance, a young man named Ashok, a student from a Dalit labourer family who had been expelled from college for his participation in student agitations). It was unusually clear to the women being interviewed, therefore, that they could express unconventional opinions. There is ample methodological justification for this approach: when "underdog" or subordinated groups perceive the questioner as representative of society's power structure (which most foreign and educated upper-caste interviewers are, in fact) they are likely to express the acceptable view and values of society, whatever deviant ideas they themselves may hold. As Joan Mencher has noted in her study of Untouchables, in most cases "it was simply too dangerous to express any but the official line outside one's own community."¹

In all the voluminous social science research on India, women such as Kaminibai are rarely to be found as the subjects of study, speaking in their own voices, coping with their own lives and difficulties. Up to now the vast majority of published material on Indian women has dealt with the middle classes and upper castes; even the numerous studies of "working women" have in fact focused on middle-class employees rather than working-class or peasant women.² Village studies have dealt very little with the particular problems of women, and where they have done so it is most often with the situation of women of richer peasant or landlord families.

With few exceptions, mostly material from journalists or organizers,³ the only material available on lower-caste agricultural labourers and working-class women has been statistical analyses of work participation.⁴ The lives and views of poor women are rarely studied with the same sensitivity as those of middle-class women, and the research rarely asks such questions as: How do lower-

class, lower-caste women actually perceive their position in society? How much do they accept it? How do they cope with the daily realities of their lives? How do they engage (if they do) in action to change their situation?

Because of this failure, it is easy to accept the notion that the primary barriers to change in women's status are *attitudinal* and that middle-class educated women are the most dynamic element in promoting change in women's position. Women, especially uneducated lower-class women, are seen even in the most sophisticated anthropological studies as caught in tradition; as accepting the conventional, hierarchical values that define their role as subordinate to that of men.⁵ This distortion is striking even in the recent influential interpretations of the Chicago School of Indian Studies which purport to focus on the understanding that Indians themselves have of society as a determining force in the dynamics of social structure. But these analyses seek to develop a model of caste that utilizes Louis Dumont's concepts of hierarchy and "purity and pollution," or that develops concepts of "code and substance" that are basically those of orthodox Hindu and Brahmanical traditions.⁶ In taking the orthodox Brahmanic caste model as central, such studies once again end by viewing sub-ordinate groups (and this includes both lower castes and women) as being acted upon as victims and not as actors.

The Chicago position has been challenged, however, by Joan Mencher in her article "The Caste System Upside Down."⁷ It argues that the Untouchables do not accept the traditional upper-caste interpretations of what is normal and proper, that they maintain an opposing set of values, that they perceive the system as exploitative and their own position as resulting from powerlessness rather than the workings of karma. While caste ideology functions to divide the lower classes, and thus preserve the status quo, she argues that power and economic dominance are more fundamental. Mencher does not deal specifically with the role of women, though one of the unique characteristics of the lower castes in India is the greater work participation of women and their greater social equality relative to the men of their caste. But, she suggests, it is necessary to take into account the viewpoint of those at the bottom

in analysing the caste system or the social structure as a whole. My interviews with lower-caste and agricultural-labourer women like Kaminibai were an effort to do this.

In this interview Kaminibai reveals a crude, but fairly explicit sense of class dichotomy. But her sense of being treated unjustly and *overworked* as a woman is as high or higher than her consciousness of caste oppression. In this interview, she was facing two people, one (me) obviously concerned with women's issues, the other (Ashok) anxious to point out caste issues. While she got leading questions from us, her outburst on women's double work was one of the most strikingly spontaneous parts of the interview. I found this sense of a double oppression throughout my discussions with low-caste women. However, these views often have to be elicited, since organizers on the Indian Left (including those in anticaste movements as well as Socialist or Communist labour organizers) have stressed class and caste issues much more than the particular problems of women. When women like Kaminibai do come into contact with notions on the subordinate status of women, there is quite often an emotionally strong response, particularly through the theme of overwork ("Upper-class women don't need women's liberation like we do—they can have servants!"). In contrast, middle-class women, including Dalit students,⁸ are more likely to stress the cultural aspects of women's low status.

Kaminibai's preoccupation with education is interesting. There is a high degree of cynicism about literacy, education, texts, readers, and writers (i.e., the literate). She also feels excluded: "If I had been educated I would have been a leader, but as it is I'm only a bull for a festival." Education apparently functions not only as a road to advancement for some but as a component of ideology in contemporary India. The poor are being convinced that they remain poor not because of their karma or caste status but because they are ignorant. To take one set of figures, from 1960 to 1963 only 12.5 per cent of all Dalit women in Maharashtra were educated to the fourth grade, only 2.4 per cent beyond the seventh.⁹

Her statements about "unity" reflect the awareness among the rural poor and workers of India that improvement in their situation has and does come only through organized struggle. Kaminibai's pessimism about this illustrates one side of the coin, but she is

speaking from a village with almost no history of organization or struggle, no unionization attempts among agricultural labourers or among the few hundred workers in a local factory. In other parts of the state, where unionizing attempts had been made, Untouchable women have indicated more confidence in united action between different castes of workers. In some ways the most widespread social movements that have had some effect on rural poor women in western India have been the ideological and organizational challenges to the social structure mounted by Untouchable and low-caste people themselves. In recent years these challenges have included the increase in agricultural labour organizing in the villages (which challenges the caste as well as economic practices of dominant landholders), the formation of student groups and political associations, and new religious associations. All share a self-conscious rejection of Hindu orthodoxy and the development of self-definitions that seek to escape caste boundaries. The most notable of such challenges has been the "Dalit movement," which provides the setting for the interview with Kaminibai.

Far from accepting traditional caste values, low-caste groups have a long history of attempting to reject and transcend them. Under British colonialism this rejection took the form, among many low castes, of identifying themselves as "non-Aryan" or "original" inhabitants of the country who had been overrun and enslaved by invading Aryans from whom the high castes were descended.¹⁰ One of the strongest movements grew up in western India among the Mahars of Maharashtra under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the most famous untouchable leader of modern India and a long-time political opponent of Gandhi.¹¹ The Mahar movement drew in part on themes developed in the earlier non-Brahman movement of Maharashtra, whose leader, Jotirao Phule, in the nineteenth century had described all lower castes as the "non-Aryan" original inhabitants and demanded the total abolition of caste.¹² But Ambedkar chose to take the religious path of self-redefinition and eventually announced his conversion to Buddhism, which he saw as both an Indian religion and an egalitarian one whose origins and history embodied a resistance to caste Hinduism. Millions of untouchables, particularly the Mahars,

followed him. At present the vast majority of India's officially listed 3,600,000 Buddhists are ex-untouchable converts, most of them from Maharashtra. Women were significantly involved as participants and occasionally as leaders in the religious movements and economic and political campaigns that occurred under Ambedkar's leadership and after his death. One result of this is that the Neo-Buddhist (ex-Mahar) women are thought to be more politically and socially conscious than those of other low castes in the area. In any case, women such as those I interviewed overwhelmingly identified themselves as "Buddhist" rather than "Mahar."

This new Buddhist identity proved to be a dynamic factor for many Indian untouchables in the north, where it has spread more recently,¹³ as well as in Maharashtra. It has proved insufficient by itself to change their economic and social status on a mass scale. In fact, in Maharashtra in the last ten years, as well as in the rest of India, there have been increasing clashes in the villages between caste Hindus and untouchables and rising atrocities, including murders, rapes of women, and other forms of assault. To a large extent these may be ascribed to the increasing resistance and aggressiveness of the untouchable labourers themselves in the face of increasing landlessness, increasing shortage of employment even as agricultural labourers, rising prices, and the growing polarization between the rural poor and the richer peasants and landlords. As a result of the rising village clashes and disillusionment with the traditional Buddhist and Republican party leadership, a number of educated but still unemployed or underemployed Buddhist young men began to define themselves not as untouchables, not simply as Buddhists, but as Dalit, a Marathi word meaning literally "downtrodden" or oppressed, which had a stronger class connotation than any of the other self-definitions to emerge up to that point. It suggested that the world is divided into those who are downtrodden and exploited and those who exploit them; it expressed the intention to rebel.

The first impression of this new identity took the form of powerful poetry, the "Dalit literature," the first Indian literary tradition to evolve in modern times from low castes.¹⁴ The next development was organizational: the formation of the Dalit Panthers, self-

consciously named after the Black Panthers with whom the militant youth identified as the strongest symbol of black revolt.¹⁵ The Panthers formulated a manifesto that defined "Dalit" as meaning all the oppressed, not simply untouchables, but also workers, landless labourers, and poor peasants. With the manifesto two major tendencies developed. (1) One group defined Dalit according to the manifesto. This group was characterized as the "Marxist" faction with a tendency to insist that the most basic oppression was economic, or at least that economic and cultural oppression were so interwoven that neither could be dealt with separately. (2) The second group defined Dalit as including only the traditionally low castes and tribes. This group tended to revert to the definition of themselves as "Buddhist" (thus implicitly excluding non-Buddhist untouchables) and to see oppression primarily in cultural terms, arguing that Hinduism was the primary enemy and that the first step should be a mass conversion to Buddhism of all the lower castes. In both instances, "Dalit", as a self-applied concept, was really used only among the educated in Maharashtra and not among the lower-caste untouchables in the state or among untouchable groups in other parts of India. Almost all Dalit spokesmen (and most in fact are men) clearly recognize women to be the "downtrodden among the downtrodden," as it is sometimes put. They site Ambedkar to support this view: "Dr Ambedkar described the Hindu caste system as a pyramid of earthen pots set one on top of another. Not only are Brahmans and Ksatriyas at the top and Shudras and untouchables on the bottom, but within each earthen pot, men are at the top and the women of that caste are on the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. And at the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women."¹⁶ Although the Dalit poets are all men, their sense of the oppression of women comes through powerfully in their poetry. Nevertheless, the majority of Dalit poets have tended to view women as victims rather than actors.¹⁷ The image of the oppressed mother, who has suffered and toiled for her son's education but seen little of its fruits, is a recurring one. In this respect the Dalit poets do not differ from the prevailing view of lower-class women as acceptors of conventional norms. The "suffering mother" theme in fact illustrates the *ambivalence* of the relationship

between the educated, militant youth and their illiterate labouring mothers, between those who have gone ahead and those who are left behind.

Yet, if the interview with Kaminibai is symptomatic, as I believe it is, the downtrodden among the downtrodden are not simply passive victims or ignorant, tradition-bound sufferers, as Dalit poetry and most of the scholarly studies on Indian women have suggested. To be sure, the suffering mother as upholder of convention does exist—in this village she was represented by Ashok's mother, an agricultural labourer who was bitter that her son, for some reason incomprehensible to her, had quit school and the possibility of good employment to become a low-paid union organizer. Kaminibai, on the other hand, may feel helpless, but she expresses the readiness to act given the opportunity and leadership. In fact, in the interview, she asks for leadership—from anyone who is willing to assume that role, including me. As another Dalit woman labourer said to the youth interviewing her, "Don't just take our interview—organize us! I am ready to fight. If they put me in jail, at least I can eat."¹⁸ Kaminibai may not have enough to eat; she may feel ignorant, but she knows that she does not know, and because of this awareness her world has changed as irrevocably as that of the son.

Like her, millions of low-caste labourers in the villages of India do not exist in a world of caste tradition but in a changed world where distant tremors of rebellion echo. In areas where there has been intensive organizing among agricultural labourers and peasants, organizers have found their most dedicated activists and local leaders among male youth and women (including mature women), while the older men of the community remain backward and "traditional." Kaminibai, interviewed in a village where the poor have not yet been mobilized and where disunity and the sense of powerlessness prevail, illustrates equally well the potential for change. In fact, at the very basis of Indian society, among the downtrodden among the downtrodden, the current mood seems to be not one of a mute acceptance of tradition but one of bitterness, anger, and a readiness to act when action looks possible.

Kasegaon, India

Notes

- ¹ Joan Mencher, "The Caste System Upside Down, or the Not-So-Mysterious East," *Current Anthropology*, 15, no. 4 (December 1974): 469–93.
- ² Among the most important works on the contemporary position of women are Kamla Bhasin, ed., *The Position of Women in India* (Bombay: Leslie Sawhney Programme of Training in Democracy, 1972); Karen Leonard, "Women and Social Change in Modern India," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Spring-Summer 1976): 117–80; and Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). The most comprehensive report on Indian women as a whole is the Status of Women Committee, *Towards Equality* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1974).
- ³ Among the exceptions are Padmini Sengupta, *Women Workers of India* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1970); Maria Mies, "Indian Women and Leadership," Gail Omvedt, "Class, Caste and Women's Liberation," and Susan Mody and Sharayu Mhatre, "Slum Women of Bombay," all in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 6 (1974). Other works by organizers or journalists include Vimal Ranadive, *Women Workers of India* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1976).
- ⁴ Besides the Status of Women Committee's report, statistical and demographic analysis is given in a number of sources. Among them are Ashish Bose, "A Demographic Profile," in *Indian Women*, ed. Devaki Jain (New Delhi: Government of India Publications Division, 1975), and the following articles in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Kumudini Dandekar, "Why Has the Proposition of Women in India's Population Been Declining?" (October 18, 1975); Pranab Bardhan, "On Life and Death Questions" (Special Number, August 1974). In the same weekly, see, on work participation, Kamla Nath, "Women in the Working Force in India" (August 8, 1965), and "Female Work Participation and Economic Development" (May 23, 1970); Leela Gulati, "Occupational Distribution of Working Women" (October 25, 1975). "Female Work Participation: A Reply" EPW (August 9, 1975), and "Female Work Participation: A Study of Interstate Differences" (January 11, 1975); J.N. Sinha, "Female Work Participation: A Comment" (June 7, 1975); on agricultural labourers in particular, Leela Gulati, "Unemployment among Female Agricultural Labourers" (March, 1976).
- ⁵ E.g., David Mandelbaum, *Society in India: Continuity and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 62.
- ⁶ See Louis Dumont, *Home Hierarchus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Steve Barnett, Lina Fruzzetti, and Akos Ostor, "Hierarchy Purified: Notes on Dumont and His Critics," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 55, no. 4 (August 1976), and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Caste Systems."
- ⁷ Mencher, p. 476.

- ⁸ For a militant and feminist Dalit student view, see the Manifesto of the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (League of Women Soldiers for Equality), April 1975 (translated from Marathi).
- ⁹ Cited in Bhaskar Jadhav, "Peasant and Dalit Women in the Rural Areas," *Lal Nishan Pakshik* (March 25, 1975), pp. 10–15 (translated from Marathi).
- ¹⁰ For a discussion of the origins of these approaches, see Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society* (Poona: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976), pp. 112–16.
- ¹¹ The most important studies of Ambedkar and his movement are those of Eleanor Zelliot, including "Learning the Use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra," in *Caste in Indian Politics*, ed. Rajni Kothari (London: Orient Longman Co. 1970); and "Dalit Sahitya: The Historical Background," *Vagartha* 12 (January 1976): 1–10.
- ¹² Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt*, pp. 98–123.
- ¹³ On the north, see Barbara Joshi, "The Buddhist Movement of Western Uttar Pradesh: 'Ex-untouchables' as Agents of Change" (paper presented at Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, New York, March 27, 1977).
- ¹⁴ On the poetry see Zelliot, "Dalit Sahitya"; Dilip Chitre, "The Architecture of Anger" (paper presented at Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, New York, March 27, 1977); and Dilip Padgaonkar, introduction to the *Times of India* weekly supplement on Dalit poetry (November 25, 1975). Numerous poems are now translated in these and other sources.
- ¹⁵ See J.B. Gokhale, "The Dalit Panthers and the Politics of Confrontation" (paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, New York, March 27, 1977); and, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, S.D., "Children of God Become Panthers" (August, 1973), "Attack on Dalit Panthers" (January 19, 1974), and "Dalit Panthers: Another View" (May 4, 1974).
- ¹⁶ Jadhav, p. 13.
- ¹⁷ Among the exceptions are Jadhav and the *Janwedana* editorial.
- ¹⁸ Interviews in *Janwedana* (December 8, 1975) with agricultural labourers and prostitutes (translated from Marathi).

Of Land and Dalit Women

KANCHA ILAIAH

Andhra women have set an agenda for the rest of the country by waging a struggle against the liquor economy. The discourse on the social impact and historical significance of the 'liquor struggle' expressed itself in several ways. Though the movement was initiated by Dalit women who were also poor in class terms, since liquor (native and foreign) being a problem of all classes, women of hierarchized classes and castes participated in it. The ruling classes of Andhra including the ruling parties like the Congress and Telugu Desham hijacked the movement. Of course, in electoral terms it ultimately became a cushion bed of TDP. However, the anti-liquor movement influenced the basic political consciousness of working class women in general and Dalit women in particular.

At that time it was not certain as to what implications the consciousness that liquor movement structured in the minds of people would have for future. Both the middle and upper middle class men and women thought that the anti-liquor consciousness would not have the spill-over effects. Many thought the anti-liquor consciousness began with the problem of liquor, and with the enforcement of prohibition that consciousness would end there itself. Of course, even while the anti-liquor movement was on, some of the CPI(ML) groups were arguing that the anti-liquor consciousness of Andhra was not a spontaneous one but it was germinated and nurtured by the ML groups as part of a new form of struggle that they visualized in the changed context. And it was proved in the Maddur movement.

The struggle of Maddur Dalit women clearly points to a new

agenda that Dalit women are attempting to set and the basis of this struggle certainly lies in anti-liquor consciousness. The attempt of the Maddur Dalits is to change the slogan from "women against liquor" to "women for land". In their own experience the prohibition did not ban liquor but merely changed the brand and reached their homes even after it was banned by the TDP Government. Though the TDP's Rs 2 kg rice scheme could give some solace, it was not a solution to their poverty, untouchability and oppression. To discover the essence of land struggle they seem to have exhausted all other forms and seem to have learnt a significant lesson to anti-liquor movement that if women organize themselves, under their own banner and under their own leadership even "breaking the sky" (*Aakashanni baddalu kottuta*) would not become impossible.

About a year back 60 Maddur Dalit women formed an Aadarsha Mahila Sangham under the leadership of Varginamma (35), an unmarried sub-post master of the same village. She belongs to a literate Mala family whose father was a part time school teacher and part time post-master, Varginamma says that she studied upto SSC and consciously avoided marriage. Ever since she gave up studies, she was part of the 'Mala-Madiga' labour folk who constitute the bulk of the village population. Maddur consists of 200 SC families (100 Mala and 100 Madiga) and about 15 families own small parcels of land. The remaining families survive on agrarian labour. There are also about 250 Muslim families of which about 150 families have small and middle farmer status with an ownership of 5-15 acres of land and also some assets around. There are about 10 Boya families which own some land each. That apart there are about 10 Yadava families, 10 washermen families and some barber families and all of them are landless poor. The social consciousness of Malas is slightly higher than that of Madigas as most of the Mala families are part of the small church congregations that take place every Sunday. However, the real reason for so many families not having land is not because the village *ayacut* does not have much land but it is because the major chunk of village fertile and barren lands are in the hands of 14 Reddy families who have established their hegemony and monopoly over not only that village but over the nearby ones too.

Budda Ram Mohan Reddy, the stud-bull landlord of the village, is a brother of Budda Vengal Reddy who was an unchallenged MLA of Atmakur constituency for more than fifteen years and a former minister in the Congress government. The armed faction that the Budda brothers lead could kill anybody after one warning. If anybody is marked and told that "he will be fed to the fish" the next day his body floats in Teluguganga canal. Ram Mohan Reddy controls about 170 acres of land and half of it is patta land and the other half government land which he illegally occupied. Since he is a law unto himself nobody dared to complain against him. Next to Budda family is that of Shankar Reddy who happens to be a relative of Budda brothers. Shankar Reddy, though controls about 50 acres of land, is a schemer who has been playing politics of 'divide and rule' between Malas and Madigas. Of the remaining 12 Reddy families, each one controls about 50 acres and one such family is that of Rama Koteswar Reddy who also had been holding the post of Village Administrative Officer (VAO). These 14 Reddy families are also part of the Kurnool Reddy faction gang which operates with licenced and unlicenced guns and bombs prepared in their private arsenal.

The Aadarsha Mahila Sangham of Dalit women decided to take on a fight with Budda Ram Mohan Reddy himself by attempting to cultivate a 'porambok' (government) land which though was not exactly under the control of Rammohan Reddy but was being used as cattle-grazing ground by him. It is adjacent to his farm house. It was not an ordinary idea to enter into that land because it could cause any number of deaths. Knowing the dangers involved the 60 women decided to enter into the field without involving their menfolk at all. The non-involvement of menfolk in the land struggle was not merely a tactical question but in their prolonged debates they understood that men would easily surrender to landlords because he himself runs a liquor shop and they know that their men continue to be slaves of the liquor against which they fought some time back. Government's ban or no ban liquor keeps flowing into the mouths of their men.

However, it was not an easy task to retain the unity of Dalit women in such a difficult situation—some of them are mothers of suckling children, some of them are old women, and some of them

are pregnant women. They know that the immediate pressure of stomachs and small needs that push them into the trap of landlords would break the unity. They, therefore, entered into a written agreement that one who breaches the agreement should pay a fine of Rs 1000 to the Sangham. One who talked to the women would realize that their impregnable unity was not because of the agreement and fear of fine but it was because of their zeal to acquire land for themselves. In October, 1994 the Sangham entered into the plot they have chosen after making sure that it was *porambok* land S.No. 663 and cut all the trees, removed bushes, levelled bunds, made it ready for cultivation. Since women alone were doing all the jobs the landlord found it confusing that such docile and obedient women were doing all this! The landlord sent his pilots (in Kurnool district every landlord would have a team of pilots who conduct initial raids and throw up necessary threats) so that the social forces operating against the interests of landlords would come to "their senses" and surrender to the landlords. The women told the pilots that they were tilling *porambok* land and it does not belong to anybody. The pilots told the women that Ram Mohan Reddy had a claim over the land and in their own interest they should leave the field. The women replied that even at the cost of their lives they were prepared to cultivate it. For the time being the 'Reddy Sena' was not in sight and the Sangham seeded the land with jawar.

But after 10-15 days the landlord sent his army along with his tractor, ploughs and destroyed the jawar crop and seeded the land with sunflower. The women sensed the mood of the landlord and went to police station, RDO, Collector and requested them to restore that land to them. They told different wings of the state that they were meek and helpless before the armed power of the Reddys. For quite some time the wings of the so-called democratic, welfare state chose to stand by the landlord as in Rayalaseema area the real rulers of the administrative wings do not exist in the form of Collector or SP but they exist in the form of landlord—the dora. No wing of administration goes against the interest of the dora. The Dalit women also approached leading political parties—Congress, TDP, CPI and CPM. No party was bothered about the women because all these parties are headed by the

Reddys. They finally approached Sandhyamma (Sandhya), Vice-President, Progressive Organization of Women (POW), Stree Vimukti.

The Maddur Dalit women did not really know when they approached Sandhya that she belongs to CPI(ML) Janashakti. What they knew about her was that she was a popular woman leader who protested against P.V. Narasimha Rao's visit and got arrested under TADA and also she contested against Vijayabhaskar Reddy, the top leader of Kurnool Reddy faction, when he was the Chief Minister of the State.

With the entry of POW (Stree Vimukti) which was backed by the CPI(ML) Janashakti and also supported by several Dalit organizations, the struggle took a new turn. The Sangham decided to wait till the sunflower crop got ready for harvesting, and one day mobilized forces and cut the entire crop. The decision was not leaked even to the Dalit men. They took quick training to use chilli powder, lathis, knives and sickles when the enemy comes to attack them. The men were asked to keep a watch and in case of an attack send the information to different centres like Atmakuru, Kurnool so that Janashakti party and other Dalit organizations can do something from outside.

As the women were cutting the sunflower crop, as usual, the landlord sent his pilots but the women asked the pilots to go back. The pilots simply retreated and the landlord instead of venturing to attack chose to send the police. By evening as the women were pooling the cut-crop the police arrived. Since Sandhya and Varjinamma were present, under their leadership they encountered the police. "On whose complaint did you come?" the women asked. The reply of the police was, "Nobody complained, on getting the information that crop on a disputed land was looted we came on our own." The women asked, "How do you know that this land is disputed land?" The police was prepared to take the crop forcibly and the women were prepared to resist such a step. However, they reached an agreement that until the revenue department gives a verdict on the ownership of the land, the crop should be under the control of Pamulapadu PS and the real supervisor of the crop should be Pamulapadu VAO. Though the police gave them a lot of trouble in transporting the crop the women patiently endured

those problems and saw to it that the crop of five lorry loads reaches Pamulapadu. They took a receipt against the crop deposited with the Police Station.

Meanwhile K. Raju, a Dalit IAS officer, whose role at Nellore, as Collector, was resented by the Congress, as the Dubagunta women's consciousness was said to have emerged from adult literacy books that he got prepared and thus was posted at an insignificant place at Hyderabad, was now posted as Kurnool Collector. The TDP Government wanted to express its appreciation for his role as Nellore Collector, as the liquor movement helped them to come back to power and they thought that Kurnool would be a relevant place for him because it was a political centre of TDP's arch enemy—Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy. But as a proverb goes, for Reddy landlords of Andhra there is no permanent party and permanent loyalty. The moment the Congress was defeated, all the friends of Vijayabhaskar Reddy joined the TDP. In that flow Budda Vengal Reddy and Ram Mohan Reddy also shifted their loyalty to TDP. For Raju, the Kurnool situation was more difficult. What he did at Nellore was to help the poor rebel against the very state of which he himself was a part, and that went unnoticed for a long time. The Dalit women's fight in Kurnool was with landlords who were running the state institutions as their private shops. For dalit women it did not matter who the collector was because their experience with Pamulapadu MRO who incidentally happened to be an SC woman was horrifying. All along the struggle she supported the landlords. They pressurized the Collector to conduct an open enquiry into the actual position of the *porambok* land S. No. 663. The Collector instructed the RDO Ramasubba Reddy to conduct an open enquiry right in the village. On March 29/95 an open enquiry was conducted. The land records in the possession of Ram Koteswar Reddy (VAO) were examined in the public. In this open enquiry the VAO was caught for manipulating the record. He created a bogus record in the name of 20 Madigas and others who were subdued to support the landlords. On March 30 the enquiry was to continue but at about 7.30 am the rumour spread that Ram Koteswar Reddy committed suicide. In no investigation did it become clear whether he committed suicide or the landlords killed him, lest the whole false records they created for

the rest of the lands would also get exposed. Nevertheless he died in a private hospital leaving a note behind (perhaps the landlords may have taken a note from him) that because he was abused by Dalit women and Sandhya he preferred to die rather than live. The landlords on several occasions abused Dalit women, raped many of them but yet they have no regrets and they never think that a sense of shame is also part of Dalit life. Here is a landlord who commits suicide for the simple reason that he was insulted in public. The Dalit women said "We shall now abuse many more landlords in public and we will see how many of them will die like that." But what followed the VAO's death is shocking.

On the 29th evening itself the landlords sent five intoxicated thugs to attack the women. The women sensed the danger and as the five men were approaching them they sprinkled chilli powder in their eyes and beat them to pulp. They physically dragged them to the police camp and handed them over. On the 30th while bringing the VAO's dead body back to the village the landlords attacked Varginamma's house and burnt it. As the Sangham women were working out their strategy sitting at a place the landlord's mobs attacked the women. They kicked Varginamma from all sides. She was disrobed and was about to be thrown in her burning house. She had bitten those landlords holding her and somehow escaped and ran for her life. Four other women Rangamma, Maryamma, Pullamma and Danamma were disrobed and made to parade semi-naked in the village. Having sensed the danger, the majority of women got into the stream waters that flow nearby the village like ducks, dipped themselves in the water, so that the attackers could not see them. As the landlord gang went inside the village the women ran away for life and reached Atmakur where CPI(ML) Janashakti has its office. The way women escaped the goondas that day was something heroic.

The Malas of Maddur reached Kurnool to stage a dharna in front of the Collector's office, on April 1, 1995. Meanwhile the police were planning to arrest Sandhya and other Dalit women as the landlords filed a case against them for abetment of suicide. At the same time the police were quiet about the atrocity case that the Dalit women filed. However, the police managed to arrest Sandhya on April 3, and arrested Ram Mohan Reddy the next

day. Varginamma and Rangamma were hospitalized. While they were in the hospital the Reddys managed to use some doctors and nurses to give Varginamma some poisonous medicines—when they failed at that, they attempted to kidnap her. Varginamma foiled all their efforts. She reported every attempt of the medical staff to the Superintendent of the hospital and also to the Collector.

The Malas continued their struggle while living in a camp near Pamulapadu. Along with the fact finding teams of civil liberties groups and women's groups the Collector and other police officials also visited Maddur women's camp. Several Dalit organizations sent their teams, and MLAs of the area also visited. What is important is while the Karamchedu camp was conducted by Dalit men in 1985 the Maddur camp was conducted by Dalit women. They told the officials, MLAs and whoever visited the camp "all the landlords including dorasanies (wives of doras) have to be arrested, land pattas must be issued in their (women's) names, the sunflower crop must be handed over to them. The landlords had burnt and looted their houses so compensation must be paid for that and till then they will not enter Maddur."

Finally the officials had to do all that the women demanded. For the first time in the history of Kurnool the landlords and their wives were put in jail. The revenue officials had to complete the enquiry and issue patta papers to the Dalit women, the Collector also promised necessary compensation for those whose houses got burnt and looted. On April 23 about a thousand people marched back to Maddur in what they called a *Jaitra Yatra* (victory march). While going back to the village the women led the procession though quite a lot of men also took part in it. The processionists armed themselves with lathis, knives, bows and arrows and entered the village at 6 pm. In spite of the fact that the Dalit women and men walked about 25 km. in the hot sun from Atmakur to Maddur covering six villages their spirit remained untired. The procession went into every lane of the village.

The Maddur struggle centralises the land question at a time when land reform is getting pushed under the carpet. The new economic policy has made the liberal parties including the communist parties forget the question of land reforms because distribution or socialization of land is seen as inimical to NEP. In this

national environment of anti-land reforms the TDP government also seems to have decided to centralize the government and private lands in the hands of a few landlords who want to become capitalist farmers.

The revolutionary groups and Dalit organizations have begun to resent this land policy of NTR. A few weeks ago the Bahujan Samaj Party filed a writ petition against this policy in the state High Court. However, the CPI and CPM being allies of TDP are not willing to fight against NTR.

Secondly for the first time the question of gender got tied up to land. Hitherto all movements refused to see the link between land rights to women and their liberation from double exploitation. Even the most militant Telengana Armed Struggle and Srikakulam struggle did not demand that land rights should be given to women. More than any other means the patriarchal structures were protected by not allowing the women to become legal owners of land. In all these struggles wherever the government and private lands, were assigned to individual families, the legal rights were given to only men. The Maddur women, by asking for legal rights to women, raised a real ideological question with regard to gender biased ownership rights on property.

The Maddur message is spreading all over the state in general and Kurnool district in particular. Every village now whispers that if women are prepared the land will be in their hands. All the Reddy landlords under the leadership of Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy are now rethinking their strategy. Before every village becomes a Maddur they should do something, lest they lose their landlordism.

For CPI(ML) Janashakti it was a chance to experiment its new theory—Indian revolution combines three components—class, caste and gender. Janashakti in its international conference held early this year proposed this new agenda to the Indian revolutionaries. In the context of the Brahminical feudalism the revolutionaries should change their formulation of earlier ‘one dimensional class struggle’ to ‘three in one’ struggle (class, caste and gender). With this aim, along with the squad based class movement, it stepped up its efforts to put Dalits and women in the visible fronts. The formation of Democratic Action forum of Dalits and Minorities (DARODAM) and its envigoured efforts to activise

its women's wing POW (Stree Vimukti) all show signs of the new realization. Though the Maddur women in the beginning started the land struggle (class struggle) on their own but when they approached POW, the leadership of POW made it a point to push the movement to its logical end. The POW leadership though headed by upper caste women seems to be convinced with the theory that caste should be on the agenda of Indian new democratic revolution.

The Maddur struggle established the fact that in order to shake the upper caste-landlord hegemony a struggle not only has got to be that of caste, class and gender but, it must combine legal and illegal forms so that the mobility of forces could be flexible. To shake the political base of the landlords a struggle must acquire popular sympathy. For, women being in the forefront of the struggle for government land the sympathy to Maddur struggle acquired a common sense base. All the Dalit, Ambedkarite and Christian associations knowing pretty well that the struggle was being led by an ML group came openly in support of the struggle. Solidarity committees were formed both at Kurnool and Hyderabad. These Committees mobilized moral and material support. On the 14th April all the Ambedkar associations organized a big procession in support of Maddur struggle where thousands walked semi-naked in the streets of Kurnool. The Maddur experiment also shows that the key points of administration should be manned by Dalits so that a basic sympathy to the struggling masses goes along with rule implementation. Here the fact that the Collector, Joint Collector and the Superintendent of Police (SP) who were themselves Dalits played a crucial role. What the Janashakti did here was that it immediately trained some women and men to use weapons for self defence. Because of this initial training of how to handle chilli powder, lathis, sickles, particularly backed up by armed dalams, even the most dangerous landlords thought it wise to honour the law. If this threat was not there when the doras and dorasaniyas were arrested for the first time in the history of Rayalaseema feudalism they would have simply massacred several Dalits in the area and terrorized the Dalit masses of the area.

The Maddur struggle has shown that female militancy has a more sustained potential than male militancy. For women

achieving results to improve family conditions is the single most important target. They cannot be easily lured with marginal benefits. In other words they cannot be cowed down with corruption, liquor, money and so on and so forth. One could hardly come across men whose conviction to hit the target was as strong as in Varginamma, Rangamma, Maryamma, and Pullamma of Maddur even at a time when they were brutally attacked and badly injured. For example Varginamma repeatedly said that it does not matter even if 'we die but we should not allow the landlords to gain control of the land.' Maryamma whose hand was broken in the struggle remained an angry 'female tiger' throughout the struggle. Is it not surprising that in hot (April) summer all those women who walked 25 kms many carrying children on their backs did not get tired even after 10.30 pm? At the public meeting even at that time when all those urban sympathizers were on the verge of collapse, the Maddur women were in a mood of singing and dancing. Though small, it is a victory that keeps the spirit of the struggling masses high.

Published in Frontier, September 2, 1995, pp. 4-9.

Unmusical Chairs

P. SAINATH

Nagapattinam (*Tamil Nadu*): Even since her election as panchayat president in Vadakarai, R. Abhuravam has faced a curious problem. She has wrested the seat of power—but still does not have a chair.

Abhuravam is a dalit, and her sitting on a chair is seen as a threat to the social hierarchy. So the upper castes in the village of Keelvelur block have vetoed chairs in the panchayat office.

In Ayakarambulam, Panchayat President G. Palanivel had to fight for his chair for months. The upper castes in this Vedaranyam block village did not like his sitting on one. Some dalit-led panchayats in Tamil Nadu are actually trying to pass one-point “theerumaanams” (resolutions): they want chairs in their office.

For strangers to the caste system here, a battle over chairs might seem absurd. For dalits in these villages, it is anything but funny. Here, the chair is more than a figurative symbol of power. It is a metaphor of human dignity.

“Six of nine members in our panchayat are from the backward castes (BC) and only three are dalits,” says Palanivel. “The BCs said ‘we have done fine without chairs for years. So why do we need them now? What’s wrong with sitting on the floor?’ They blocked our move.”

“The panchayat did fine all these years without chairs,” he says, “because, all these years, the panchayat did nothing. Governance meant arbitrary upper caste rule. But when I as a dalit became president and started doing things properly, this became an issue.”

Simply, the struggle over chairs is also one over democratization of the panchayat.

reasons are obvious. They don't want a harijan to sit on a chair. That too, in their presence. The clerk bypasses me all the time. Whatever I achieve and bring for the panchayat is never put down in the minutes. Nor is what I say in the meetings recorded."

In Abhuravam's case, the mix of class and caste prejudice gets more complex. She is a labourer on the farm of landowner Sounderaraja Naidu. The well-off Naidu is also the panchayat clerk here. Some well-to-do landowners take on jobs as panchayat clerks. It gives them power and access to records they can manipulate. An assertive clerk can reduce a diffident, illiterate president to a figurehead.

"When I became panchayat president," says Abhuravam, "Naidu was not comfortable." A woman he was used to ordering around on his farm, was now his boss in the panchayat bhavan. The idea of a dalit labourer, a woman at that, giving her landlord orders was too much for Naidu to take. He sought a transfer.

The local CPI (M) protested, pointing out that his sole concern was to avoid working under his former labourer, a dalit. The Block Development Officer refused Naidu a transfer. That was a victory. But Naidu and other upper caste folk hit back by hindering Abhuravam's work at every stage. Starting with chairs.

"They don't like my sitting on a chair," she says. "They don't say so openly. But they all oppose having chairs on flimsy grounds. They keep saying we have no money. Everyone knows the real reason."

Everyone does. Because even this poor panchayat has an annual fund of around Rs. 1 lakh. So a few chairs should not be a problem.

"We moved a resolution to sanction Rs. 5,000 for eight chairs," says Abhuravam. That includes, generously, one for the clerk himself. "But the purchase has been stalled." Meanwhile, the clerk disappears on the days he is needed most. On days that records or accounts are to be checked, for instance, leaving Abhuravam to face the music.

For Palanivel, the dilemma resolved itself quite curiously. "Our resolution did not go through. But our clerk Nagraj, a Thevar, soon found the joke was on him," he says.

The village is close to the district headquarters. Which means that visiting government officials who have to tour the panchayats

find this an easy place to cover. So Ayakarambulam sees several officials.

And they cannot be asked to sit on the ground.

"The officials come often and in numbers," says Palanivel. "Suddenly our clerk realized that each time they came, he had to get fetch chairs for them. He had to walk around the Thevar colony asking for chairs from different houses. Then he had to lift and bring them here himself. And later he had to carry them back to return them."

In the new situation, Nagraj could not push the dalits around to get his job done. In an earlier era, he might have ordered the man who is now president to go fetch the chairs.

"When this happened a few times, his views on chairs in the panchayat underwent a radical change," says Palanivel, laughing. "So one day the upper castes brought up the matter of chairs and decided to buy them. Six months after I had failed to get them to agree to it!"

"So we consulted the BDO. He said, 'yes, buy the chairs and get a good one for Palanivel that can be recognized as the president's chair.' They went out and bought precisely the same type of chairs for all members after I gave them the money. Cheap, bad plastic ones."

In both villages, of course, the conflict does not end at chairs. "There is great resentment over Abhuravam becoming President," says her husband S.P. Raman, a CPI (M) activist. Her being both a dalit and a woman, he says, means the rancour is not just among the rivals she defeated in the polls. "All the upper caste people hate it," he says. Raman should know. Politically, he began as a Dravida Kazhagam worker. "I was a great believer," he says. "I used to taunt the other parties. Until one day my younger brother married a BC girl. The whole village ganged up against us and we faced terror. The BCs in the DK showed me that party's true face. That was when I broke away from them."

Abhuravam, he says "faces hurdles at every stage. They only need one excuse for a caste conflict to which they can give a different twist. So we have to act carefully to avoid that." The result, as Abhuravam points out, is that the panchayat is hamstrung

in many activities. Even as we spoke, the clerk left the village, obviously taking us, too, for government officials.

"He's got it worked out," says Kovai Subramanian, a local journalist who tracks the panchayats. "He's from the upper strata and knows the village and its records better than she does. The president changes after five years. The clerk will always be there. Chances are his dominance will grow if the new president is more pliable than Abhuravam. Here, because there's a political party behind her, he's finding it difficult. But he can sit it out and wait for the next president. That's been his thinking once the transfer was refused."

In Palanivel's village the upper castes avoid calling him for any functions. "There is a girls school here," he says. "For their school final day function, they did not invite me nor put my name in the invitation. Instead, they called a neighbouring panchayat chief, a BC woman. When I asked, they said this was because it was a girls school and I was a man—though the school itself is run entirely by men. If this was the case why did they not call the woman president of the other, nearer panchayat? Because she is a dalit."

"Nor did they invite the woman panchayat member Chandra from here. She too is a dalit. But they invited our vice president Kalyan Sundaram who is a BC male. This place works on caste. The harassment began in '96 itself, days after I was elected. I got a postcard that said 'harijans can't run panchayats. We will kill you.' There's so many ways they put pressure on me."

Among them, "thevars who are not members come and sit in panchayat meetings. They shout, threaten, disrupt and dominate."

"I once told them, you have no place here. There were two kinds of replies (apart from threats): husbands of women members insisted on being there to help their wives. And others pointing to the presence of these husbands asked: if they can be here, why not us? If I push further, there will be violence. I am afraid of starting a caste conflict we cannot handle." Only about a third of the 4,000-odd residents here are dalits. Local teashops still serve dalits in separate glasses. And, adds Palanivel, "temple entry remains a problem here."

"Once, 50 thevars showed up at my house on the pretext of

discussing something. In fact, they were threatening me, my family, our home. They were abusive and aggressive. I want to be a democrat. I don't want to bring the police into everything. How will the panchayat function? Also, the upper castes get court stays on all works here. They got a stay on a road that offended them because it gave access to dalits. We fought and won that case. Then more projects were blocked. How many times can we keep going to court?" The main litigant is a Thevar schoolteacher.

With all his troubles, Palanivel recognizes that reservations for the dalits in the panchayats have sparked off a process. "It has jolted this hierarchy," he says. And despite the hardship she's faced, Abhuravam agrees. "I am happy to be president," she says. "Very happy."

From The Hindu March 14, 1999

Head-loads and Heartbreak

P. SAINATH

Sikar & Jodhpur (Rajasthan): Patasi Bai collects a roti from each of 25 households in Sikar every day. Once a month, some of them even give her a few rupees. She isn't seeking or getting alms, though. And those giving her the rotis wouldn't dream of eating with her. Patasi Bai's work is indispensable to their homes. But they take special care to avoid any sort of contact with her.

She is the manual scavenger who cleans their dry latrines.

"Yes, I carry night soil. The payment is one roti per household daily and maybe Rs. 10 a house each month. I clean around 25 homes every day. We do have to carry out the night soil in baskets on our heads to the dumping place." That could be half a kilometre from the latrines she cleans.

Patasi Bai is one of hundreds of women in Sikar town forced to earn their living this way. That is, as scavengers who clean out dry latrines by hand. Who carry out the human excreta—that polite society calls "night soil"—in baskets on their heads. The women use "parethas", metal pans to scoop up the night soil with short brooms in their hands. Officialdom labels Patasi Bai a Bhangi. A member of a scavenger caste. She, however, identifies herself as a Mehter. And quite a few of these groups increasingly call themselves Balmikis.

The work she does earns her no more than Rs. 250 per month. Often less. "Some households give no money. The basic payment is one roti per house."

In Jodhpur, her counterparts get less. Here, says Girja Bai of the Mehter basti, "each household gives us five rupees monthly

and one roti daily." In one count, a fifth of all women in this basti carry night soil.

How many manual scavengers does India have? We don't really know. Right up to the 1971 Census, theirs was not even listed as a separate occupation. Some state governments simply deny the existence of night soil workers. Yet, even the flawed data that exists suggests that close to a million dalits work as manual scavengers. The real figure could be higher. They could be cleaning the latrines, as Patasi Bai does. Or disposing of dead animals with their bare hands, as Bana Das does in Churu.

Their work draws the worst penalties of ritual "pollution" in the caste system. Untouchability on a large and systemic scale haunts every space of their existence. Even other Scheduled Castes treat the Balmikis as 'untouchable'. While the practice does exist within dalits, the Balmikis get the worst of it. Their bastis are more sharply segregated. And are often in worse condition than the others. "You can tell a Balmiki colony by its extreme squalor," says Bansi Lal in the Sikar bast. The picture of breakdown around us rubs it in.

The rigidities of caste are not confined to rural areas "out there". Manual scavenging is a caste-based occupation. (With some families, it is almost hereditary.) And the Balmikis work mainly in towns and cities as a special caste for the job. In the countryside, people prefer to defecate in the fields. Sikar, with close to 200,000 people, is a town in Rajasthan. Jodhpur is one of its important cities with a population nearing a million and a half.

"About 12 of the 25 houses I clean have pucca latrines," says Gomati in Sikar. "But these aren't enough for big families. Mostly, the adults use the pucca ones and keep kachcha latrines for the children. I clean up the latter." Gomati gets no regular monthly payment. Only the daily roti. "Sometimes when I have to clean out the soiled clothes of the children, I get five rupees. Not otherwise."

Rajasthan is one of many states that have, in 50 years, done almost nothing on scavenging.

In 1993, the Centre moved on the issue. It passed the "Employment of Manual Scavenger and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act." This being a local government subject, the

Centre sought and gained the support of five states for its legislation. That is: West Bengal, Tripura, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Goa. (In Kerala, public awareness and political action ended the practice much earlier.) Quite a bit later, the states of Madhya Pradesh and Andhra too, joined the fold.

Rajasthan is yet to enforce such a law.

Defining a scavenger is itself a bit of a problem. Most come from families involved in sanitation work. Some family members may hold jobs as sweepers in the local Nagar Parishad. These 'safai karamcharis' do more than one type of sanitation work.

In the same families you can have some people doing night soil work on their own. Besides, a few women who work as safai karamcharis for the Parishad, also clean private latrines after hours. And some municipalities hire night soil workers on the sly, knowing it violates the law. Even in major metros, scavengers are lowered into manholes to clean them. They are also sent down gutters to unclog them.

The girls clearing night soil in Sikar are often young. Shakuntala, 16, Lachchi and Reena, both 14, are just three amongst many. "Some months ago, we had something like a strike," they told us when we met them during their daily rounds. "For two months we abandoned this work. Nothing happened. No one came to our aid. We were given no other options. So we resumed, though we hate it. Only women do this job."

Social resistance to 'bhangis' trying to change their caste role has been great. Chottu Ram of the Mehter basti told us: "there was a lot of pressure once when the women resisted. Some were even beaten up."

"The men of our households make us do it. You should talk to them," said Kamala, on the same rounds. The men we spoke to made lofty declarations against it. They included leaders of the BJP and Congress-linked factions of the safai karamcharis union. But there was little evidence of real opposition to the practice. Their unions' charters of demands listed nothing relating to night soil.

"If we had trolleys or wheel barrows, it would be better," says Patasi Bai. "We keep asking for them. The Parishad says 'yes' but never gives us any."

Union officials confirm that the only time trolleys were given, they went to male employees of the Nagar Parishad. The few given to night soil workers were stolen and sold as scrap.

The women also want longer brooms. Ganesh Berwal of the CPI (M) here points out that: "They get much shorter *jadus* here than in other places. The means bending much more and closer direct contact with the muck, with all its attendant health risks."

As researcher Susan E. Chaplin points out in a revealing paper, action on the law has been mostly confined to the states that first supported the Act. This ensures that "the dehumanizing practice still continues" in no less than 2,500 towns across India. As she shows, the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes had called for halting the practice as early as 1956–57. Such things as the head-loading of night soil, he had held, were responsible "for the spread of the evil of untouchability." They were also an inhuman and unsanitary method of disposal. Nothing much happened, though.

Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot insists, however, that he wants to move quickly on the issue. He told us in Jaipur that his government would enforce such a law soon. And some initial steps to bring the state in line with others that have acted do seem to have begun. The Mehters will be watching him closely. Particularly in Jodhpur, which is Gehlot's own turf.

In the Jodhpur basti, they estimate that perhaps a fourth of the city's latrines are dry ones. They badly want to do away with this practice which they see as destroying their dignity.

In Sikar, too, the women would like to end this 'gandhagi'—the code word for night soil. They're united on that. But almost all are united on one other thing.

They must be recompensed for the loss of earnings a real ban would entail.

"What options do we have?" asks Gomati, in Sikar. "My husband works in the Nagar Parishad. I have three daughters and two sons. We have to support the children and what we earn is very little." Patasi Bai has seven children to care for. Shakuntala and her friends know the practice kills their dignity but also believe their families would be destroyed without it. They would like to

be rehabilitated by the state. They just don't believe it will act for them.

Governments often claim lack of funds to convert dry latrines to flush ones. But, the Balmikis point out, there's money for other—bogus—schemes. Also, the Eighth Plan had a sum of Rs. 464 crore for the rehabilitation of safai karamacharis in practice, they've seen very little of the money. In theory, replacing their small earnings should prove easy. In reality, their experience of how government works makes them cynical.

"It's a funny country," says Shyamji Kalla, a left-wing activist in the Jodhpur Mehter basti. He's a retired sailor who saw action with the INS Vikrant in 1971. "When privy purses were abolished, those who sucked up to British imperialism were compensated. Those who served the enemy were rewarded. But when night soil is banned, those who've served this society in the most degrading capacity will be penalized. They'll get nothing. That's how class works."

He says he wants to be proved wrong. As he also points out, it isn't only about money. It's about justice. Even where the Balmikis have improved their financial status, social standing has not kept pace. In many towns, they have a near monopoly on sweepers' jobs. That makes them salaried employees on wages which, though low, are far higher than they had some years ago. But their 'monopoly' is on a kind of work no one else wants to do. So they are still looked down upon. Change has been there, but it's been too slow. And often, very bitter. Because, as Kalla says, "that's how caste works."

From The Hindu October 3, 1999

The Hindu Code Bill for the Liberation of Women

PRATIMA PARDESHI

Dr. Ambedkar sought to change the Laws of Manu which were misogynistic and reduced a woman to a commodity. Thus in the post-independence period as the architect of the Indian constitution, he granted to women the basic rights to justice, equality and security. However it may be underlined here that he did not see this as an end in itself.

It is mainly to challenge and change the law of Manu and to grant women the basic rights to property that Dr. Ambedkar drafted the Hindu Code Bill. The Hindu Code Bill in a sense marks the end of the Law of Manu and brings forth a text that has possibilities for the liberation of women. Dr. Ambedkar in a powerful symbolic gesture publicly burnt the Manusmriti; for within this text was the justification for the enslavement of the shudras and women. Some activists in the women's movement do not grant this and argue that Dr. Ambedkar had burnt the Manusmriti not in support of women's liberation but rather in the context of caste. (For instance such an argument had been put forth by Dr. Neelam Gorhe at a seminar on 'Dalit Women' organized by the Department of Sociology, 1994). To make such bold and unfounded statements is being unjust to the thought of Dr. Ambedkar or else really amounts to a failure to understand the same. For Dr. Ambedkar, the issue of caste and that of the subordination of women are inseparable and do not present a dichotomy. It must be underlined that he had appealed to women to join the struggle for the annihilation of caste because he saw the caste system as being exploitative to women. The detailed analysis of the Law of Manu and

the exploitation of women was not surely an exercise in intellectual rigour for Dr. Ambedkar!

Women are the central core of the Hindu Code Bill and through the laws on property, marriage and divorce, he sought to enhance the cause of women. For instance, he argues that under the prevailing Hindu Law, the man could marry as many times and that this was unjust and had to be changed to a uniform principle of monogamy for both men and women. Since according to this Hindu Law marriage was a sacrament, a break in this or divorce was not possible. Dr. Ambedkar saw this as unjust and sought to amend it. By 1937 Act of Inheritance, women did not have an equal share in the property. Dr. Ambedkar sought to amend this and to grant to the daughters a share equal to that of the sons. He asks the question "what does this Bill seek to do?" and answers that this Bill keeps the old things in their place and seeks to give primacy to the new. . . . It grants to every Hindu the right to make a will of his property and therefore if the daughter gets a share in the property, the conservatives could do very little against it. For they had the right to derecognise their daughters from the share in the property by making a will of the same. (This is extracted from the speech of Dr. Ambedkar at the Parliament of Siddharth College, June 11, 1950 and which appears in *Satyashodhak Marxwadi*, April, 1983.)

Hence it is apparent that Dr. Ambedkar is opposed to the prevailing Hindu Law because it denies women the right to property; it denies women the right of divorce while granting to men the right to several marriages and that he condemns these laws as patriarchal and seeks to amend this through the Hindu Code Bill. He stressed that in the interests of Indian women, it was important that the Bill be passed. The correspondence between him and Pandit Nehru stands as ample evidence for the same. He writes to Nehru that the Bill had for him an extraordinary importance and appeals to him to leave no stone unturned to convince the opponents and to pass the Bill. That the core of this Hindu Code Bill was the liberation of women and that the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar were to this end is apparent.

The caste panchayat is a produce of the caste system and is an

institution which regulates and exploits women. The law of the panchayat is an oral law and the 'panch' the administrators of justice are invariably men. The panchayat is male dominated and justice can easily be bought and sold herein. Yet several feminist activists and scholars have supported the institution of the caste panchayat. They see the legal process as time and money consuming and therefore not easily accessible to women. They argue that the bureaucracy is inhuman and corrupt and often at the end of the long wait, justice may not be delivered at all. On the other hand, they see the caste panchayat as being less time consuming, easily accessible and as giving 'justice' in a quicker time framework. For example, Rekha Thakur, activist and researcher of the Bahujan Mahila Aghadi argues "the Bahujan woman is exploited more outside the home than inside it. The mechanisms which regulate her lie outside the family. Within the family, she is relatively more free than the higher caste women. Since the burden of purity of lineage was not on her shoulders she had access to separation from the husband and to remarriage. The discord within the family could be referred by her outside the four walls of the home. The caste panchayat became the mediating institution and would administer justice. Hence the legal right to divorce has not given her much; customarily this right as such had been available to her."*

Dr. Ambekar's prime reason in becoming a part of the Ministry was to get the Hindu Code Bill passed. On realizing that the Government was postponing the issue, he resigned from the ministry. In a clarification about his resignation, he says that he joined the ministry only for the Hindu Code Bill, but that he had been harassed in this context. Thus the compromise that he made of going into the Constitutional Committee was sheerly in the interests of the Bill. For, he firmly believed that women had to be liberated from the prevailing patriarchal brahmanical law and the oral law of the caste panchayat. He saw this Bill as an important event in the life of the newly emergent nation and yet it had not been taken up in any of the significant conferences. Probably the

* Extracted from Rekha Thakur's 'Samaan Nagari Kayadyala Tattvata Virodh Hava! [Uniform Civil Code Should Be Principally Opposed!]', unpublished.

Hindu Code Bill would remain the single most important law to come before the Parliament. He concludes that any law that does not address the hierarchy and gender prevalent in Indian society and only seeks to ameliorate the economic conditions is akin to building castles in the air. In the patriarchal feudal society, women were bonded though the caste based laws of marriage, divorce and inheritance. The colonial rule had led to the emergence of new classes and a new caste-class society emerged. Education for women, participation in the social production, a focus on conjugality and better status for women came up as demands from this new society. Hence the historic contribution of Dr. Ambedkar lies in his sustained efforts towards getting the Hindu Code Bill, passed as a basic requirement towards the fulfilment of these new demands. In a sense this marked the journey of the law from a caste based patriarchal law to a individualistic and class based societal law.*

In these writings of Dr. Ambedkar, one can trace the theme of what he conceptualized as non-brahmanical perspective on women's liberation. Such a perspective aims not at mere improvements in the economic status but gives primacy to a revolutionary agenda of annihilation of caste and the subordination of women. Often his presentation of the Hindu Code Bill is misconceived as his manifesto on women's liberation. Though, he refers to the Bill as incomparable in its importance to any other Bill, the Bill is never conceived by him as an end but only a beginning. He compromised and joined the Ministry because he saw the granting of freedom of property, however limited as a beginning of the liberation of women. But this does not mean that his views on the liberation of women were limited to the issues of economic freedom only. One only has to recall here his insights into the relationship between the caste system and the subordination of women, his sustained attacks on patriarchy through his writings and speeches and it becomes apparent that the Bill presented for him a counter revolutionary position to the prevalent Law of

* Extracted from "Mee Mantripadacha Rajinama Ka Dila?" [Why Did I Resign from the Minister's Post?], From Bha.Di. Phadke (ed). *Dr. Ambedkaranche Samaj Chintan*.

Manu. That he dared to resign on the question of women is an unparalleled act even among the leaders of the women's movement in India. Thus the Hindu Code Bill was conceived by Dr. Ambedkar as a way out of the impasse that the women's question was in and he never meant it as a manifesto for the liberation of women in India. That is why even in his letter of resignation from his post of Law Minister, he underlines the fact that the Bill is significant only because it proposes a law that is more progressive than the two other prevalent laws.

Several positions are being put forth on the issue of the Hindu Code Bill. While some believe that through it the manifesto of women's liberation was been put forth; others argue that it was not really drafted by Dr. Ambedkar and that it marks the codification of the colonial process of making laws based on the religious texts and in consultation with the Sanskrit pundits. Madhu Kishwar and Rekha Thakur's views would subscribe to this latter position. While Gail Omvedt argues that in noting that the Hindu Code Bill was heralded by Dr. Ambedkar, we overlook the fact that the A.I.W.C. had lobbied for this demand since 1925. Such a comment arises from an illfounded comparison between the creation of the Bill and those who suggested changes therein. Moreover there is a fundamental difference in the position of Dr. Ambedkar and the A.I.W.C.; for Dr. Ambedkar the Bill marked a progressive step in the larger programme of the liberation of women while for the A.I.W.C., it was a matter of political manouvre. This is apparent from the fact that neither come out in support of the Bill when Dr. Ambedkar presented it to the Parliament nor did they condemn the morcha organized by the women of the Jansangha in opposition to the Bill. For what reason then should we glorify the fact that the demand had been taken up by the A.I.W.C.? It is surprising that the two issues; the contribution of Dr. Ambedkar to the Bill and that of the A.I.W.C. should be mixed up at all!

The perspective on and agenda for the struggle for the liberation of women

In refuting the biologicistic explanations of caste Dr. Ambedkar underlined the linkages between the caste system and the

subordination of women. In arguing that castes were created to perpetuate inequalities, he further argues that within the caste hierarchy every caste expresses pride in its own identity. Every caste is therefore active in keeping its difference and maintaining its own identity. It is not only that they restrict dining and marriage to the caste circle but each caste also wears clothing that symbolizes the identity of the caste. Food habits, rituals of marriage and clothing have been regulated by the caste system. This readily marks the untouchable from the savarna. While issues of food and marriage rituals are issues of an intra caste nature, the issue of clothing is treated in more details by Dr. Ambedkar. Clothing marked the untouchable as so and hence Dr. Ambedkar appeals to the people to denounce the clothing marked for them by the caste system. In his discourse on clothing he underlines the need to denounce caste based clothing both for wiping out the identity of the untouchable attached to it and for leading a life of self-respect.

The untouchable women are marked as lowly from their costume. The brahmanical tradition has thrust upon them the costume of half (above the knees) sarees and heavy and cheap jewellery which marks them as untouchable. These traditions were designed to keep these women enslaved. He thus appeals to the women to deny these symbols of enslavement. In a speech at the Mahad Satyagraha Parishad, he said "You all must vow to leave behind the old and dirty customs. To state the truth there is no branding on the forehead of the untouchable which would mark him so. But it is through the customs that people are able to mark the caste of a person. I am of the opinion that these customs have in their earlier times been thrust upon us." (Bahishkrut Bharat, 1928). Thus Dr. Ambedkar underlines the need for the women of the lower castes to keep a neat and clean appearance so as to wipe away the caste marking that are thrust upon them and is in no way asking them to beautify themselves.

In any political struggle the issue of identity is significant. Several times identities come to be used for political purposes. Rather than going into a debate on what really constitutes identities, it is important that we study the identities of the different politically progressive trends in contemporary politics. For instance several movements have emerged in the recent past which are putting at

the central position the O.B.C., Matang, Non-buddhist Dalits, women or the dalit identities. Identities are not created overnight nor can they be thrust upon. The crux of identity politics must be progressive. Identities are real only if they are rooted in the struggles to end the vested political, social and cultural interests.

Another important issue in the context of identities, is the need to ask the question which identity is being forged? Is it brahmanical, patriarchal, inequalities? If it is so or it is only an identity of political opportunism, we will have to condemn it. The dalit identity, even in the pre Ambedkar era has always drawn from the non-brahmanical tradition. From Shivram Janoba Kamble, Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, Mahatma Phule to Dr. Ambedkar we see the continuity in the non-brahmanical roots of the dalit identity. The contemporary dalit movement also draws upon Phule-Ambedkarism and such a dalit identity which has emerged from the history of a long struggle is a revolutionary identity. This identity has not emerged overnight and the dalit community will not be willing to easily give up this identity for it is based on a history of mass struggle. That women were also a part of this history is apparent from the fact that due to the efforts of social reformers such as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Gopalbaba Valangekar, V.R. Shinde, Shivram Janoba Kamble, Shahu Maharaj, Munpande Kalicharan, Nanda Gavali women were always present in large numbers at the public meetings.*

The dalit movement in countering the different caste based atrocities had taken up several struggles of identity. Dr. Ambedkar himself lead the Chavdaar Lake Satyagraha and the Entry into the Kalaram Mandir. These were broadbased struggles of identity. His appeal to deny caste based costume is also a part of this broad based identity struggle. In the Dalit Mahila Parishads, several resolutions were passed which called upon dalit women to stay away from the Tamashas and to refuse to carry the gas lamps on their heads for these practices marked them as lowly and contemptuous. That is to say Dr. Ambedkar saw the question of the dalit

* The oral narratives of women in the Ambedkarite movement have been documented in Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon(eds). *Amhihi Itihaas Ghadivila* [We also Made History]

women's identity of self respect as crucial to social reform and to the revolutionary struggle. Thus his conception of identity was broadbased and therefore dalit women constituted an intrinsic part of his thought and struggles.

In any social movement, there is always a long term programme and a short term agenda. In the early phases of the movement, it is likely that the short term agenda comes to be taken up. That is to say even if the ideology of the movement is broadbased some short term goals may be pursued, for struggles for the long term goals cannot be build out of nothing. This seems to be true of Dr. Ambedkar's revolutionary programme too. Thus struggles such as those of the temple entry were taken up by him to enhance in the minds of the dalits the anger against the injustice done to them.* It is important to note here that temple entry was for him a short term programme and the annihilation of caste the long term one.

That the liberation of women is linked to the long term programme of the annihilation of castes and classes and that such a struggle is likely to be long drawn was apparent to Dr. Ambedkar and thus the programme that appealed to the dalit women to give up their caste based costumes with a view towards wiping away the markers of untouchability was no doubt a short term programme in his agenda for women's liberation. That the denial of these caste based costumes and customs will not lead to the annihilation of castes was obvious to a thinker and leader of his calibre. This position of his should not be misconstrued as a brahmanisation of dalit women for we only need to recall that if brahmanisation of women had been his position; he would not have underlined the fact that the question of the dalit women was a political question and would not have organized political parishads to this purpose. That he saw the abolition of castes as primarily women's struggle needs to be noted here.

Consciousness raising among untouchable women

There are several occasions on which Dr. Ambedkar addressed the untouchable women and from these speeches it is apparent

* G.B. Sardar, *Maharashtratil Samajik Prabodhanachi Vatchal*, [The Path of Social Enlightenment in Maharashtra] p 57.

that he conceived their question; whether the personal or the social as being essentially a political question. That is why, he time and again underlined the abolition of untouchability as the women's responsibility and argued that men would take a longer time to achieve this end. To this purpose, he always organized separate political meetings of women and it is this precedent that lead to the formation of the Dalit Mahila Federation.

Dr. Ambedkar's speech to the Dalit Mahila Federation in 1942 is important in this context. In this speech he conceives the participation of women in a movement as a measure of its relative success or failure. In the same speech, he says "I am conscious of the fact that if women are conscientised the untouchable community will progress. I believe that women should organize and this will play a major role in bringing an end to social evils. I tell this from my own experience. When I decided to work with the dalit question, I had resolved that the women should be brought forth along with men. That is why the Parishads are always accompanied by the organization of Mahila Parishads. The progress of the dalit community should be measured in terms of the progress made by the womenfolk. Every girl must stand alongside her husband, not as his slave but at his contemporary as his friend. . . ."

Thus through these speeches Dr. Ambedkar

1. Argues for the formation of independent women's organizations.
2. Underlines that social progress is possible only if women come forward.
3. Reinstates his belief in man-woman equality.
4. Considers the progress of dalit women as the measure of the progress made by the dalit community.
5. Highlights that women should enter the struggle as equals and not only because their fathers, brothers or husbands are a part of the struggle. He is opposed to her entering the struggle as his slave or follower and underlines that she must be an equal and a friend.

* Extracted from Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon (eds). *Amhihi Itihaas Ghadavila* [We Also Made History].

Through these speeches the faith that Dr. Ambedkar had in the capability of the exploited women is apparent. It is through the propagation of his ideas and his work that dalit women began to awaken, organize and revolt. In the satyagraha and in the morcha women participated in large numbers. This is the first time in history that dalit women came out in the public in support of their social and cultural demands. Prior to this women had come out in the public in the struggles led by Mahatama Gandhi; but in what could be called as transformative or revolutionary struggles, it is in the Ambedkarite movement that the women first took to the streets. The credit for promoting this organization among dalit women goes to Dr. Ambedkar.

This political conscientisation that Dr. Ambedkar brought about is reflected in the programmes and the leadership of the Dalit Mahila Federation. The speech by the General Secretary of the Dalit Mahila Federation, Ayu. Indirabai Patil speaks for the same. She says "... Hindu religion has corrupted our minds such that we think that giving into the whims and fancies of the husband and managing the hearth and the home is all the work we need to do. We have the important task of removing these ideas of enslavement from the minds of our sisters." Similarly, Sulochanabai Dongre who was the Chairperson demands "Our women must get representation in all the local District level Boards ... And under specific conditions women should have the right to seek divorce, polygamy should be banned by the law and that dalit women should accept the principle of family planning. For the progress in the education of dalit women, hostels be started in every place."

Thus began the journey of the organization of dalit women for their identity, their existence and for a humane society. Society began to recognize that in the political sphere too women could operate with courage, daring and efficiency. These women realized that their struggle was for their identity and they began to publicly react to any insulting and derogatory behaviour from the savarna men and women. This was a direct resultant of their participation in the new knowledges and their political conscientisation. At the proceedings of one of the Akhil Bharatiya Mahila Parishad, savarna women discriminated against the two dalit women

delegates by setting plates separately for them. At this January 1938 Conference, these two dalit women publicly condemned this act. This act of the savarna women was called 'lowly and mean' and dalit women were asked to keep their self pride and identity.

This torch of struggle had been lit by Dr. Ambedkar for he believed in the strength that lay dormant in women. The incident of 7th April 1930 at the Temple Entry is a case in point. At the time of temple entry when one of the priests pushed a young dalit girl, she slapped him. (Y.D. Phadke in 'Dr. Ambedkar Aani Kalaram Satyagraha'). Such incidents had kindled the fire for self respect. At the political Parishads organized by Dr. Ambedkar not only were separate Mahila Parishads organized but also the Parishad passed several resolutions condemning the atrocities against dalit women. These were mainly resolutions against those practices that enslaved women. The Parishad in an important resolution condemned the practice of child marriage and discussed the biological and psychological ill effects of the same. It was proposed that the age at marriage be fixed at a minimum of twenty two for boys and sixteen for girls. (Bahishkrut Bharat, 1927). Considering the fact that the dowry question could be lethal for women, the Mahar Panch Committee had resolved that the expenses at marriage should not exceed a maximum of sixteen rupees. The details of how these sixteen rupees were to be distributed were also given. For example, five rupees were assigned for the ritual of Sakashgandha, nine rupees for the engagement, two rupees for the marriage and it was enjoined that the parents should not give any ornaments to their daughters. This resolution is extremely significant.

All this went towards kindling tremendous self confidence in the dalit women. They refused to make any compromises when it came to their political work. They time and again proved to the community the importance of their liberation. In Nagpur, Jaibai Chaudhari qualified as a teacher and took up a job in a school. But the savarna and Christian students refused to be taught by a dalit teacher. She was advised to convert to Christianity; to which she courageously refused. She resigned her post, realizing that the issue at stake was not so simple as to get resolved by her conversion. This strength came from the collective struggles of dalit women.

Probably realizing that the question was of the real struggle, the annihilation of castes, she started the Chokhamela Girls' school. She remained active in the struggles of dalit women to the end of her life. In 1920 the Bahishkrut Samaj Parishad passed a resolution that girls be given free and compulsory primary education and on the occasion Tulsabai Bansode and the young Rukmini Kotangale delivered effective speeches in support of the demand. Thus it is apparent that though the programmes taken up by the dalit women's movement were short term; their ideological position was committed to the annihilation of caste system.

Dr. Ambedkar's opposition to the atrocities against women

Dr. Ambedkar having had a deep faith in the capabilities of women, always stood in opposition to the atrocities against them. The first phase of the Ambedkarite struggle was dedicated to enkindling self respect in the minds of dalit men and women and ensuring for them a humanitarian treatment from the society. He stood against the domination and exploitation of any varna by the other.

In 1956, amidst a gathering of lakhs of people, he embraced Buddhism and gave to the Neo-buddhists the gift of the twenty-two vows. These vows deny all the inegalitarian practices, customs and forms of worship. One of the vows "I shall abstain from alcohol" was in part to protect the women who were at the receiving end of the ill effects of this alcohol. In his conceptualisation of the Dhamma, there is an insistence on ethics. A religion such as this, Dr. Ambedkar opined would render more justice to women. The freedom and access to knowledge for women encoded in Buddhism played a significant role in his thoughts on the Dhamma.

His opposition to the atrocities against women is also apparent in the speech that he delivered to a gathering of prostitutes. At this gathering of devadasis, vaghya and muralis in 1938, he said "Stop practising prostitution. Poverty is not something we should fear. It has been with us ever since our birth. So do not practise this occupation for fear of poverty." That poverty should drive women to selling their bodies is perceived by him as an atrocity against women. In keeping with these principles he refused to accept money donated by Pathe Bapurao, a brahmin tamasha

artiste, arguing that the money was gotten from making Pavalabai, a dalit woman dance on the tamasha floor. It is dalit women who are most exploited by caste based prostitution such as the practice of devadasi and this is strongly condemned by Dr. Ambedkar.

The Preface to Dr. Ambedkar's *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women* gives us clues on how he stood in opposition to the atrocities against women. He entitles the preface 'Tearful Words' and makes a reference therein to an important story. The story goes that, in a particular village there had been a notification for one and all to excommunicate completely a Buddhist monk. A brahmin woman breaks this injunction and gives water to the thirsty monk. The men of the village beat up the woman to teach her a lesson. Dr. Ambedkar is opposed to this violence against women and grieves for the position of women in such a society.

Dr. Ambedkar: the true heir to the legacy of Mahatma Phule

Dr. Ambedkar carried forth the legacy of the non-brahmanical thought of Mahatma Phule. This is also true in the context of the liberation of women. The importance of education for girls, the prevention of infanticide, the traumas of a deserted woman were all issues that inform the work of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar as they did that of Mahatma Phule.

Dr. Ambedkar felt deeply on the issue of orphaned children and unwed mothers and had proposed starting a home for them at Aurangabad. He used to say "Bring the small children here to this home, all of them poor and the orphaned, those deserted by the destitute and unwed mothers. I will personally take care of them." (Pawar and Moon: Op.cit). This goes to show that he did not take the traditional view on the issue of unwed mothers. He opined that the deserted women are left all alone to fend for themselves in a society that stigmatizes them and that he could do his bit by taking care of the children of such mothers. He places no stigma on unwed motherhood and this needs to be noted.

Savitribai and Jotiba Phule could not beget any progeny of their own. In those times there must have been pressures on Jotiba to remarry and beget children. Yet they deny these pressures and adopt a child of any abused widow. In the context of Hinduism the presence of a son as the torchbearer of the lineage is extra-

ordinary and any woman who cannot bear a son comes to be thus humiliated. Yet Phule does not remarry. As Gail Omvedt points out "Instead of insisting on a heir of their own blood and lineage they adopt the child of a widow (naturally an 'illegitimate' child). Neither do they adopt the child of a close relative as was the prevalent practice."* The issue being highlighted is that they did not see the begetting of progeny as the ultimate aim of cojugal life. Dr. Ambedkar also has a similar position on the issue. In dialogue with one of the activists of the movement, he asks him how he would feel if his wife were to desert him on the issue of failure to produce progeny and explains to him that the child is as much the wife's need as his. (Moon and Pawar, Op.cit.)

In the same vein, Dr. Ambedkar also seems to carry forward the legacy of Mahatma Phule on the issue of education for girls. In a letter to a friend of his father, he upholds education for women (Thomas Mathew in 'Krantipratik Ambedkar'). Ever after his return to India he strives to throw open the doors of education for the shudras and women. Even in his acceptance of Buddhism that this religion gave women access to knowledge played a crucial role. In his speeches, he repeatedly underlines the importance of education for women. At the Mahad Satyagraha Parishad, in a speech to the gathering of women, he says "You must also educate your daughters. Knowledge and education are not for men alone. These are important for women too. . . . If you want your next generation to progress, then you must educate your daughters." If a woman is educated, the whole family is as if put in touch with knowledge and education and a reform in ideas and ideologies becomes possible. It is with this faith that Dr. Ambedkar calls upon the women to take on the responsibility of spreading knowledge and education in society. In this way, he emerges as the true and most deserving heir to the legacy of Mahatma Phule.

The non-brahmanical path of women's liberation

In order to understand the principles of the non-brahmanical conception of women's liberation it is important to summarize the thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar on the issue.

* Gail Omvedt in *Mahatma Jotiba Phule aani Streemukticha Vichaar*, p. 15.

1. Dr. Ambedkar saw the caste system and the class system as the two major enemies. He saw both these exploitative systems as being responsible for the subordination of women. He stressed upon the caste based exploitation and traced the linkages between the caste based exploitation and the subordination of women by pointing out how castes emerged through the regulation of women. To put it briefly, he argues that women are the gateways to the caste system.
2. The subordination of women will not automatically end with the end of capitalism but Dr. Ambedkar argues that to this purpose the caste system and patriarchy will have to be attacked. The subordination of women cannot come to an end in a caste based society and it is therefore women who must lead the struggles for the annihilation of castes. He sees organic links between the struggle against the caste system and the struggle for the liberation of women. Thus the idea of women's liberation is intrinsic to his ideology and is not a token add-on.
3. His position seems to take a stance of 'Personal is Political'. He sought to bring into the public sphere, within the auspices of the legal system, the atrocities that women suffered as private within the confines of the home. Issues of bigamy, maintenance etc. are all brought into the public debate. He wishes to transform these matters of the private into political issues and to this end drafts the Hindu Code Bill. His journey of codification of the Law is one that seeks to delimit the private sphere and make more encompassing the public sphere. Share in the property for women, the right to seek divorce and to marry according to one's will are all issues that come up in the Bill and stand in opposition to the prevalent familial abuse of women. Even within the political sphere, he was opposed to private ownership of land and stood for its socialization. Thus his views on the public/private on political issues are in keeping with those on the woman's question.
4. Dr. Ambedkar takes an anti-patriarchal position in the creation of the Hindu Code Bill. He opposes the law of Manu

because it subordinates and enslaves women. He prefers the Buddhist, non-brahmanical tradition because it grants freedom to women and gives them access to knowledge. He thus believes that any social transformation is incomplete till gender discrimination in that society comes to an end.

Thus, both Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar see the caste system as the major cause of the subordination of women and Dr. Ambedkar calls upon people to revolt against this system. In order to develop upon the non-brahmanical principles of women's liberation that are embodied in the lives and works of Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar, we need to take up the following issues.

1. Dr. Ambedkar saw Hinduism as the emerging ground of the caste system and hence argues for a countering of the philosophy and the rites and rituals of this religion. A step further, we need to highlight that caste based exploitation has a material base and therefore opposing this system assumes primacy on the agenda.
2. The origins of the subordination of women, its rise and its fall have been articulated in the works of Dr. Ambedkar. The issues therein need to be put forth as a theory. That patriarchal exploitation also has a material base needs to be underlined and this must inform our agenda and revolutionary programme.
3. The programme for the liberation of women be seen as an intrinsic part of the struggles against the social, religious, cultural and political exploitation of the caste system. Such a trend has failed to emerge from within the contemporary dalit movement. Even within the Republican Party of India and the Dalit Panthers a perspective on women's liberation did not emerge both in theory and in their practices. Efforts to develop such perspectives will have to be undertaken.
4. The Ambedkarite perspective is important to a theory of the emergence and end of the subordination of women in India because this perspective by conceiving women as the gateways of the caste system draws focus on the caste based nature of this exploitation. This theory needs to be developed further by linking it to a historical materialist analysis and

to the political economy of the sexual division of labour. Developing non-brahmanical perspective of the liberation of women in India would entail such a task.

There has been a lack of dialogue between the dalit movement and the communist movement in India and this has hampered the development of Marxist perspective within the dalit movement. Learning from the history of these mistakes it seems that we can develop the non-brahmanical conceptualization of women's liberation.

From Pratima Pardeshi, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Question of Women's Liberation in India, 1998, Women's Studies Centre, Department of Sociology, University of Pune.

Appendix

National Federation of Dalit Women

NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism

Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance

World Conference Against Racism

28th August-7th September, 2001

Durban, South Africa

Preamble

Whereas there has been an increasing recognition and acceptance of the universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and growing consensus on the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights generally.

And whereas the forces of religious nationalism, fundamentalism and dominant caste chauvinism have fuelled the need for an articulation of the specific rights of dalits, indigenous peoples and religious and ethnic minorities in an increasingly hostile and violent environment.

And whereas hostile environment refers to the denial of recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the exclusion, and restriction of dalits, indigenous peoples and religious and ethnic minorities from the social, cultural, religious and political mainstream and the preference for majority communities and dominant castes in all sectors of social, economic, political life and employment.

And whereas globalisation of the economy has led to a crisis of survival in the working classes, which consist predominantly of dalits, indigenous peoples and religious and ethnic minorities,

increasing impoverishment, loss of employment, increase in trafficking, dispossession of community resources and land, displacement and an erosion of housing rights, and basic needs like water and withdrawal of food subsidies and the nullification of reservations being the immediate effects of globalization.

And whereas this rapidly shrinking democratic space and the systematic undermining of the right to life, livelihood and dignity have led to the rise of mass protest and popular struggle against a complicit state leading to large scale human rights abuse, and an abdication of democratic governance by the state particularly in respect of dalits, indigenous peoples and religious and ethnic minorities.

And whereas this compounded and systematic discrimination and the complete absence of real (as distinct from nominal) safeguards experienced by dalits, indigenous peoples and religious and ethnic minorities is a manifestation of racism and racial discrimination in the South Asian region.

And whereas the term "racial discrimination" according to Article 1 of the CERD is any distinction, exclusion, restriction on preference based on descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life."

And whereas all these forms of racism and racial discrimination are gendered, and have specifically troubling consequences for women of dalit, indigenous, and religious and ethnic minority communities in the fields of employment, right to life, livelihood and dignity, housing, education, political participation, to name a few.

We the women experiencing caste-based discrimination, racism declare. . .

That Women within South Asia and India in particular, experience gender discrimination, violence and exclusion that cuts across the divides of class, caste, community and tribe; and reiterate that state and non-state actors including caste, community, tribe and

family structures play their distinctive roles in perpetuating this condition.

We assert that, within this overall scenario, Dalit women, women belonging to the religious minorities, especially Muslim and Christian, women of the indigenous peoples experience discrimination, violence and exclusion, thrice-over, caused and perpetuated by not only their gender identity but the fact that as women, they are also representative symbols of the caste, community, tribe and ethnic groups and are specifically targeted for gender violence thereof.

We recognize that the relationship between gender and distinct forms of racism, therefore in the Asian and particularly Indian context typifies the particularity of condition of women belonging to the Dalits, religious minorities and indigenous peoples. They face targeted violence from state actors and powerful members of dominant castes and community especially in case of rape, mutilation and death; they face discrimination in the payment of unequal wages and gender violence at the workplace that includes fields (as agricultural labourers) on the streets (as manual scavengers and garbage pickers), in homes (as domestic workers) and through religious custom (as when forced into religious forms of prostitution at a young age).

We declare that Dalit women are victims of caste and gender violence, used by landlords, middlemen and contractors on construction sites and policemen to inflict political lesson and crush protests, struggle and dissent against centuries' old discrimination being inflicted on their whole community. Dalit women are raped and mutilated before being massacred and used as hostages to 'punish absconding male relatives'. At a very young age they are forced into prostitution under the *devdasi* (*maidservants of god*) system.

We declare that caste based exclusion has manifest itself in gross exclusion and violence, legitimised by tradition and certain religious scriptures, affecting basic human rights violations of one-fourth of the Indian population. This exclusion dominates mind-sets with notions of 'pure' and 'impure' and so impure as to be untouchable.

We assert that communalism (misuse of religion for political ends) of the majority in India—that is manifest in the blatant misuse of religion and religious symbols for religious ends and in the garb of democracy has clear designs on the democratic and egalitarian structure of the Indian state—is the most recent form of this aggressive denomination which is distinctly targeting India's religious minorities.

We recognise that this distinct manifestation of racism—in the form of exclusion, forced segregation and targeting through systemic violence—has been legitimised, in the Indian context, through the ideology of *hindutva* (a 'hindu' state) that is an authoritarian and discriminatory ideology and has seriously eroded the operation and functioning of the Indian State, the Indian Constitution and its secular and egalitarian character.

We state that this religion-based hegemony that is seriously eroding the democratic and secular credentials of the Indian state is, by severely narrowing national and state policies on education and doctoring school and college text-books, clearly using education as a tool for cultural ethnocide within India and thereby destroying the rich pluralistic traditions in the subcontinent.

We recognize that in practice, caste based discrimination, aggressive communalism and marginalization of the indigenous peoples, have meant the denial of the freedom to live without fear, threat and intimidation, the denial of equality before the law, organized ghettoisation and hate-preaching in educational texts. Education through policy, syllabus and the text-book is being used a tool for crude exclusion and perpetuation of stereotypes of Dalits, women, indigenous peoples and religious minority communities. In the Indian context, the hegemonising project through education has received fillip under the sway of the ideology of a 'hindu state' or 'hindu rashtra' (kingdom).

Ghettoisation and marginalisation of religious minorities in the past few years. This religion-based nationalism in the Indian context has specifically misused religion and religious symbols for political ends. These movements that have in recent years even acquired state power, have impacted on state policy, including eroding the democratic and secular values contained in the Indian Constitution.

We express concern over the resultant failure of the government to control groups in civil society that also owe allegiance to this strong religion-based nationalism which has perpetrated a sense of fear and alienation in the country's minorities. State Policy including educational syllabi and text-books have been engineered and influenced by these anti-democratic and anti-secular tendencies, resulting in hegemonistic representations of history and outright hate preaching in textbooks. A failure to implement the fundamental rights of all citizens, especially those belonging to the religious minorities at time of outbreak of violence and the collapse of the criminal justice system in punishment of the guilty—be they civilians or policemen in uniform—have further resulted in the violation of the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution leading to a major threat of subversion of one of the largest democracies in the world.

Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Agarwal, Bina. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Agnes, Flavia. *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Anandhi, S. "Representing Devadasis: *Dasigal Mosavalai*, as a Radical Text," *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 1991: 739–46.
- Anandhi, S. "Reproductive Bodies and Regulated Sexuality: Birth Control Debates in early Twentieth-Century Tamilnadu," *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*. eds. Mary John and Janaki Nair. Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
- Bajpai, Rochana, "Minority Rights in the Indian Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946–1950," *QEH Working Papers*, QEWPS30, December 1999.
- Bandhopadhyay, Sekhar. *Caste, Politics and the Raj, Bengal 1872–1937*. Calcutta: K P Bagchi and Company, 1990.
- Barnett, M.R. *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- Baxi, Upendra, "Emancipation as Justice: Babasaheb Ambedkar's Legacy and Vision," *Ambedkar and Social Justice*. New Delhi: Director, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1992.
- Baxi, Upendra, "Siting Secularism," Oberlin College, Oberlin, USA, April 19–21, 2002.
- Béteille, André, "Race, Caste and Gender," in *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective*. Delhi: OUP, 1992: 15–36.
- Bhagwat, Vidyut, "Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives—some critical reflections," in *Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives*. Ed. P. G. Jogdand. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1995 (in collaboration with University of Poona), p. 1.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

- Butler, Judith and Ernest Laclau, an exchange, "The Uses of Equality," *Diacritics*, Spring, 1997: 3–19.
- Carroll, Lucy, "Law, Custom, and Statutory Social Reform," in *Women in Colonial India* J. Krishnamurty ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh, "Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Subject," *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Chakravarty, Uma, "Is Buddhism the answer to Brahmanical patriarchy?" in *Mapping Histories: Essays Presented to Ravinder Kumar*. Neera Chandoke ed. Delhi: Tulika, 2000.
- , "On Widowhood: The Critique of Cultural Practices in Womens' Writing," in *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
- Chatterjee, Partha, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question," *Recasting Women: Essays In Social History*. New Brunswick. N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1990: 233–53.
- Coward, Rosalind. *Patriarchal Precedents*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.
- Datar, Chaya. "Non-Brahmin Renderings of Feminism in Maharashtra: Is It A More Emancipatory Force?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 9, 1999.
- Datta, Bisakha. *And Who Will Make the Chapatis? A Study of All-Women Panchayats in Maharashtra*. Stree: Calcutta, 1998.
- Derrida, Jacques, "Declarations of Independence," *New Political Science*, No. 15, Summer 1986: 15.
- Dhreshwar, Vivek, "Caste and the Secular Self," *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Nos. 25–26, 1993: 121.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind*: Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Dirks, Nicholas. *The Hollow Crown: An Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Dumont, Louis. *A South-Indian Sub-caste: Social Organization and the Religion of the Pramalai Kallar*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Galanter, Marc. *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Castes in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Gokhale, Jayashree. *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993.
- Gore, M. S. *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*. New Delhi: Sage, 1993.
- Guha, Ranajit, "Chandra's Death," *Subaltern Studies V*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987:135–65.
- Guha, Sumit, "An Indian Penal Regime: Maharashtra in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, 147, 1995: 101–26.
- Guru, Gopal Kanshi Ram *Yanca Bahujanvad*. Pune: Samajvignan Academy, 1994.
- Guru, Gopal, "Dalits in Pursuit of Modernity" in *India: Another Millenium*. Romila Thapar ed. Delhi: Viking, 2000.

- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, esp. Chapter Two "Seduction and the Ruse of Power."
- Hayden, Robert. *Disputes and Arguments Amongst Nomads*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Ilaiah, Kancha, "Toward the Dalitisation of the Nation," in *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-state*. Partha Chatterjee ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Ilaiah, Kancha. *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Calcutta: Samya, 1996.
- Indira, M. K. Phaniyamma. trans. Tejaswini Niranjana. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989.
- Irschick, E.F. *Politics and Social Conflict in India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–29*. Berkeley: California University Press, 1969.
- Jaaware, Aniket, "Eating and Eating With, The Dalit: A Reconsideration Touching Upon Marathi Poetry," *Indian Poetry: Modernism and After*. Ed. K. Satchidanandan. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2001.
- John, Mary E., "Alternate Modernities? Reservations and Women's Movement in 20th Century India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 28, 2000: WS22–WS29.
- John, Mary. *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory, and Postcolonial Histories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- John, Mary, "Gender, Development and the Women's Movement: Problems for a History of the Present," *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Mary John eds. Delhi: Kali for Women: 101–23.
- Jones, Kenneth W., *Arya Dharma: Hindu Consciousness Nineteenth Century Punjab*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Kadam, V. S., "The Dancing Girls of Maharashtra," *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society*. Ed. Anne Feldhaus. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- , "The Institution of Marriage and the Position of Women in Eighteenth Century Maharashtra" *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 25,3, 1988: 341–70.
- Khare, R.S., "The Body Sensoria, and Sense of the Powerless: Remembering/ Re-membering Indian Untouchable Women," Chapter 5 from *Cultural Diversity and Social Discontent: Anthropological Studies in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage, 1998: 147–71.
- Kishwar, Madhu. 'Equality of Opportunities vs: Equality of Results: Improving Women's Reservation Bill' *Economic and Political Weekly*. November 18, 2000. pp. 4151–56.
- Lefort, Claude. *Democracy and Political Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988: 17.

- Menon, Dilip. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900–1948*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Menon, Dilip. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Menon, Nivedita. 'Elusive "Woman": Feminism and Women's Reservation Bill' *Economic and Political Weekly*. October 28, 2000. pp. 3835–44.
- Nair, Janaki. *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women in collaboration with the National Law School of India University, 1996.
- Nigam, Aditya, "In Search of a Bourgeoisie: Dalit Politics Enters a New Phase," *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 30, 2002. See also S. K. Thorat, "Caste System and Economic Inequality," in *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Ghanshyam Shah ed. Delhi: Sage, 2000.
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind, "Issues of Widowhood: Gender, Discourse and Resistance in Colonial Western India," in *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*. D. Haynes and G. Prakash eds, Delhi: OUP, 1991. pp. 62–108.
- . *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low-Caste Protest in Nineteenth-century Western India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi; Sage Publications, 1994.
- Omvedt, Gail. *Cultural revolt in a Colonial Society: the non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873–1930*. Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976.
- Pandian, M. S. S., "Denationalising the Past in E. V. Ramaswamy's Political Discourse," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 16, 1993.
- Patel, Vibhuti, "What Happened to Women in Marathwada," in *In Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voice from Manushi*. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita eds. London: Zed Books, 1984: 177–79.
- Patil, Sharad, "Democracy; Brahminical and Non-Brahminical," *Frontier*, September 30–October 21, 1995: 42–46.
- Prakash, Gyan. *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Prashad, Vijay, "The Untouchable Question," *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 2, 1996: 551–59.
- Prashad, Vijay. *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of A Dalit Community*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Racine, Josianne and Jean-Luc Racine. *Viramma*, translated Will Hobson. London: Verso, 1997; New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2000. See especially Afterword : pp. 306–21.
- Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Rubin, Gayle, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex,"

- Toward An Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna Reiter. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975: 157–210.
- Sangari, Kumkum, "Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 23, 1995: 3287–3310.
- Sangari, Kumkum, "Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 30, 1995: 3381–3389.
- Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Woman, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002.
- Sarkar, Tanika. *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban by Rashundari Debi*. Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999.
- Schneider, David. *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968.
- Scott, Joan. *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminism and the Rights of Man*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Sen, Ilina. *A Space Within the Struggle: Women's Participation in People's Movements*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990.
- Sharad Patil Dasa *Shudra Slavery: Studies in the origins of Indian Slavery and Feudalism and their Philosophies*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1982.
- Singha, Radhika. *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Sonalkar, Vandana. "An Agenda for Gender Politics," Vol. XXXIV, Nos. 1&2, January 2–9, 1999: 24–29.
- Spivak, Gayatri, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World," In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988: 241–68.
- Spivak, Gayatri, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg eds. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988: 271–313.
- Spivak, Gayatri, "Subaltern Studies, Deconstructing Historiography," In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988: 197–221.
- Srinivas, M. N. *The Dominant Caste and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Suntharalingam, R. *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, 1852–1891*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1974.
- Tharu, Susie and Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender,' *Subaltern Studies IX*. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty. eds. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996. pp. 232–60.
- Thorat, Vimal, "Dalit Women Have Been Left Behind by the Dalit Movement and the Womens' Movement," *Communalism Combat* 69, May 2001: 12.
- V. Geetha and Rajadurai *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millenium: From Iyothee Das to Periyar*. Calcutta; Samya Publications, 1998.

- Varshney, Ashutosh, "Is India Becoming More Democratic?," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 59, Number 1, February 2000: 3–25 [and the other articles in this JAS special issue].
- Velankar, Padma, "Caste Patriarchy and Dalit Woman's Subordination: Towards a Theoretical Framework," *Sugava*, Prerana Visheshank, December 1998.
- Visweswaran, Kamala, "Histories of Feminist Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 26, 1997: 591–621.
- Wagle, N.K., "Women in the Kotwal's Papers, Pune 1767–1791," *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society*. Anne Feldhaus ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Washbrook, David, "Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 1981.
- Waters, Anne, "Family Disputes, Family Violence: Reconstructing Women's Experience from Eighteenth-Century Records," *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society*. Anne Feldhaus ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- "Women Writing the Nation," introduction to *Women Writing in India, Volume II*. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha eds. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993: 43–116
- Yadav, Yogendra, "Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge: Trends of Bahujan Participation in Electoral Politics Since the 1990s" in *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. Francine Frankel, ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Zelliot, Eleanor, "Congress and Untouchables: 1917–1950," *Congress and Indian Nationalism: The Pre-Independence Phase*. Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert eds. Berkeley; University of California Press, 1988, pp. 183–87.
- Zelliot, Eleanor, "Stri Dalit Sahitya," in *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Literature and Religion*. Anne Feldhaus ed. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Zelliot, Eleanor. *Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement*. (doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1969).

Contributors

ANANDHI S. is currently Assistant Professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai. She has published widely on the themes of gender, nationalism and Dalit politics.

PRANJALI BANDHU is a researcher and writer currently based in Chennai. She is co-editor *War and National Liberation: CPI Documents 1939–42* and co-author (with T.G. Jacob) of *Reflections on the Caste Question: The Dalit Situation in South India*.

SUMITRA BHAVE is Assistant Director (Research), Streevani, Pune.

UMA CHAKRAVARTI has taught history for many years at Miranda House, Delhi University. Among her published work are: *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*; *Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*; *The Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation* (co-authored with Nandita Haksar); *From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender* (co-edited with Kumkum Sangari) and *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood* (co-edited with Preeti Gill).

GABRIELE DIETRICH is a professor at the Centre for Social Analysis, Madurai and has worked with women's movements and unions in the unorganised sector since over twenty years. She keeps in close contact with Dalit movements and has published widely on development issues, women's movements, and cultural perspectives.

LEELA DUBE a distinguished social anthropologist, has carried out field-work in central and northern India and on a Lakshadweep island. Her publications include *Matriliny and Islam*; *Visibility and*

Power (co-edited); *Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South-east Asia*; and *Anthropological Explorations in Gender*.

V. GEETHA is a writer and translator. She has been active in the women's movement for over a decade. She has published in Tamil and English. She is the author of (with S.V. Rajadurai), *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (1998) and *Gender* (2001). Currently, she is editorial director, Tara Publishing, Chennai.

GOPAL GURU is a professor of Indian Politics at the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, and has published widely on caste, gender and movements in India.

KANCHA ILAIAH is a professor, in the Department of Political Science, Osmania University, Hyderabad, and an activist in the Dalitbahujan and civil liberties movements.

MARY E. JOHN is currently Associate Professor in Women's Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her publications include *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory and Postcolonial Histories*, (1996); *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (co-edited with Janaki Nair, 1998); and *French Feminism: An Indian Anthology* (co-edited with Danielle Haase-Dubosc et al), 2003.

KALPANA KANNABIRAN is a feminist sociologist and founder member of Asmita Resource Centre for Women, Hyderabad. She is a senior Associate Professor at the National Academy of Legal Studies and Research, University of Law, Hyderabad. Kalpana is author of "Caste" in the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women*, 2001, co-author of *De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power*, 2002, and co-editor of *Web of Deceit* by Moovalur Ramamirthammal [Kali, forthcoming].

VASANTH KANNABIRAN is a feminist poet and founder member of Asmita Resource Centre for Women, Hyderabad. She has been a teacher of English literature for over two decades and a translator.

She is co-author of *We were Making History* (Kali for Women, 1992), co-author of *De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power*, 2002 and co-editor of *Web of Deceit* by Moovalur Ramamirthammal [Kali, forthcoming].

BELA MALIK is an independent researcher and book editor currently based in Kathmandu, Nepal.

MEENAKSHI MOON has published two short story collection called *Melting Girl* and *Baudha Dharmatil Adarsha Streeya*. She edits *Amhi Maitarni*, a quarterly devoted to dalit expression.

GAIL OMVEDT works as a freelance writer and development consultant. She worked actively with various social movements including the Dalit and anti-caste movements, farmers' movements, environmental movement and specially with rural women. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and Research Director of the Krantivir Trust. She has published a number of books including *Dalit Visions; Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India* and *Violence Against Women: New Theories and New Movements in India*.

M.S.S. PANDIAN is currently a Honorary Visiting Fellow at the Sarai Programme, Centre for Studies in Developing Societies, Delhi.

PRATIMA PARDESHI teaches Political Science at the Jedhe College, Pune and is actively involved with the Satyashodhak Kashtakari Mahila Sabha in Maharashtra. She is the editor of *Satyashodhak Sanghatak* and has written several articles and booklets on issues of caste, *abrahmani* feminism also anti-Hindutva politics.

URMILA PAWAR has a number of short story collections to her credit as well as plays and travelogues. Along with Meenakshi Moon, she wrote *Amhihi Itihas Ghadavila* which documents women's contribution to the Ambedkarite movement. Her short stories have been performed on radio and television. She has participated in various forums, meetings and workshops and represented the dalit cause.

ANUPAMA RAO is currently Assistant Professor, South Asian History, at Barnard College, Columbia University. Her research interests are in Indian nationalism, caste movements, and the history of gender.

SHARMILA REGE teaches women's studies at the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre at the University of Pune. She has written on issues of caste, gender and popular culture in Maharashtra. Her present work includes the documentation of Ambedkarite Counterpublics in Maharashtra.

P. SAINATH is a freelance journalist, based in Mumbai.

MAJID H. SIDDIQI teaches history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

RAJESWARI SUNDER RAJAN is Professorial Fellow at Wolfson College, and Reader in the English Faculty at the University of Oxford. She is the author of the *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (2003), and *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, Postcolonialism* (1993), and has edited *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India* (Kali, 1999).

SUSIE THARU is Professor in the School of Critical Humanities at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad and a founder member of Anveshi, Research Centre for Women's Studies, also in Hyderabad.

ELEANOR ZELLIOT is Laird Bell Professor emeritus at Carleton College, where she taught the history of India for twenty-seven years. She has written extensively on the Untouchable movement of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, on Dalit literature and on Untouchable saint-poets and is the author of *From Untouchable to Dalit; Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*.

Blank Page